

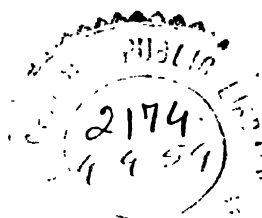
VIDEHI

A novel of Indian Life

BY

CHARLES LESLIE HOLDEN

F
H-726



LONDON

MACMILLAN & CO. LTD

1913

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

TO BAPU

Chapter One

VIDEHI had many times thought over the pattern of her life. The story gave her pleasure, and the remembering of it smoothed away the sharp edges of her experiences, and she loved to go over again the incidents that composed it. Certain images brought it back vividly—the rain falling—the dark sky at night—and certain desires when she thought about herself and her mother. So much of her life seemed a growing up and escape from home, and yet she wondered in the end whether she had escaped or only returned. She traced the story of her own development and then she discovered not herself but her mother. Where was Videhi? Where did she begin and Shalini end?

They had lived in a strange little house in Kashi. There were three rooms. The two front ones were adjoining; at night they were bedrooms and by day living-rooms. The one at the back was kitchen and storeroom, and faced the little garden where grew jasmin bushes, and a guava tree and a clump of bananas that sheltered their bathroom. How they managed she did not really know, for they were so poor. But she had very happy memories of that house when she was very young and the only child. Her father and mother were both teachers, but soon after their marriage, when Videhi was coming, her mother, Shalini, had stopped teaching.

Shalini and Ganesh, her father, had thought themselves very modern then. They had made a love match,

and belonged to different communities. They were both well read in current English and American fiction, and they both knew and delighted in the poetry of the romantics. Ganesh painted a little, and within his heart was the desire to be one of the great painters of the new India. Shalini wrote stories in Marathi for the magazines. They were good stories too, delicate, sensitive, and rich in feminine insight. They were nearly always about the moods, the whims, the sudden thoughts and daydreams of women and girls.

Shalini was beautiful; small and dark, straight in bearing. In her simple white cotton workaday sari, or in one of her few richly coloured Marathi silk saris with her gold ornaments and necklace and jasmine in her hair, she was a delight. You did not look at Shalini, for you saw only her face and her eyes full of light and laughter, and you remembered her voice, always sweet and low. Ganesh was handsome. He was very proud of his wife and daughter, and very full of the beauty of the new India that was to be.

Videhi supposed she could remember as far back as when she was three years old. She was not quite sure. Trying to recall her earliest childhood, events and things became hazy. From three onwards they became quite clear. What impressed her most in this recollection of her very earliest years was the absolute stability and certainty of things and its beauty and fragrance. The house, the plants, the very air were rich and tender with perfume.

Her mother was content and she was content. The world was opening around her. She recalled the little games she played, and the frocks she wore, and the lovely feeling of bathing after great heat, and the visits to the bazaar for shopping, and the picnics in a big boat on the Ganges. They had occasional parties at

home and friends would come. Sometimes they were all Marathi and the talk would be of Poona and the glories of Maharashtra. How excited they would get! How eagerly they would praise Maratha food and Maratha manners compared with those of the U.P. Hindu in Kashi, or the outlandish Madrassi or Bengali.

Sometimes they spoke in English. Then they usually began by talking poetry and ended by talking politics. There was only one political faith accepted, that of the Congress, but there were so many variants in the interpretation of it, and there were many heated arguments on the ethics of the Mahatma. It ended in a general acceptance of Congress philosophy coupled with the rather cold feeling that the English would never go, that the chains into which they were born were permanent.

There was an artist from Bengal in Ganesh's school. He painted in a rich vivid way. He could also sing, and when he was present the party ended with his peasant songs that delighted them all. He loved Bengal and Bengal women. His paintings were nearly all of women, goddesses, peasants or princesses, all beautiful and graceful. Shalini used to maintain that in India's past all her greatness was due to her women; that of the names that lived in India's story, if one excluded the conquerors, the rest were women. Women set the standard. Among gods and men, if one looked for perfection, one found it only in a woman's form or devotion. The artist would agree with Shalini and sing one of his lovely Bengali songs and soothe away the slightly rising anger of Ganesh.

There was much beauty in those early days. Ganesh knew a little about the stars and would name the constellations to Videhi. She forgot the names quickly enough, but she remembered the great purple curtain

of night shot with gold. Night was beautiful. It was clothed in splendour and tender with coolness and sweet perfume from the flowering trees. The harsh glare of the day was done with and the skin was no longer hot and taut. One could relax and be at ease.

There were so many scenes and incidents that she could recall. They all told the same story of a certainty, an inevitability, and more, a rightness in life. Life was fitting and proper and easy. Every year in Kashi there was a fair just outside the compound in which their house stood. On one side would be people from the villages, each with their stall of sweets, each with their different shapes and colours and flavours. And men selling pan and tobacco. Best of all were the toys; rattles and trumpets made of palm leaves; little models in clay, garishly coloured: models of people, peasants, coolies, shopmen, policemen; models of animals, the bullock, the elephant, the camel, the donkey, the mon-goose; models of gods and goddesses, Shiva, Ram, Parvati, Saraswati. Videhi loved these. She would walk with her father through the crowded street, pushing away people to get what she wanted, and take them in pride home. They were the loveliest toys she had, and for each one she invented a life history and half a dozen romances.

The routine of life was simple. Her mother and father slept in one bed in the front room and she in another. Every evening, just before dusk, the beds were made, the mattresses unrolled and the mosquito nets hung. The mosquito nets were fixed on iron frames that were taken out of the beds each morning and put away in the garden. When they had made the two beds, Videhi would go into the kitchen and watch her mother cook either rice and a vegetable, or some rotis and a vegetable. If she had been good, her mother would let her cut the

vegetable into little pieces after she had washed her hands. After supper, Shalini would put the things away and wash the dishes. Ganesh would read to Videhi and then she would go to bed.

And so another sweet day was ended and another night's dreams began. Videhi was too young yet to go to school, but she listened to the talk of the adults, and Ganesh used to try to teach her the letters and numbers. She did not like that very much, for she was lacking in patience, and also Ganesh, though she did not realise it, was not a very good teacher. She did not mind, and those simple lessons with her father seemed also part of the happy never-ending pattern of her childhood.

She slept well and had no memory of her parents next to her. When she woke up they were there and she was happy to creep into their bed for a little, but only for a little, for with the dawn the day began early. Then she would sit on the edge of the bed with the mosquito net rolled up whilst Ganesh got himself ready in the back and Shalini prepared early coffee for them all. Once Ganesh was off to school Videhi was left with her mother, and she was happy to help her with the daily tasks.

Was that an end or a beginning? Perhaps she had forgotten her childhood pains. Certainly out of that happy infancy she grew herself, and the first ventures of growing were even lovelier than the settled bliss of her infantile days.

This greater loveliness and sense of increased importance and awareness came with Rukmini. It was shortly after her third birthday. Videhi remembered Rukmini very clearly and her coming into their lives. Ganesh brought the news.

'We are having a new teacher,' he said to Shalini, 'a Madrassi, and she's going to take logic, so I'll lose that class.'

He was very disgruntled. It was his favourite subject and he felt a prestige in having been chosen before to teach it. He was especially annoyed at being replaced in his favourite subject by a woman. He did not really like logic or teaching it and he had only a knowledge of its elements, but the logic class was composed of senior girls, all nearly young women. His other classes were very young girls, and there was nothing romantic in teaching a young girl of ten or eleven the elements of arithmetic or English grammar.

‘What is she like? Have you met her?’ asked Shalini.

‘She has not come yet. She is on her way from Bombay. No-one knows anything about her here. It’s a great shame,’ said Ganesh. ‘I’d done a lot of preparation for that class in logic. I know the subject. How can a woman teach logic? Just because she’s been to England she must supplant us all here.’

And so he went on, very upset and offended.

‘We must wait and see,’ said Shalini. ‘When does she come?’

‘She’ll arrive tomorrow, about midday. The school bus will meet her at the station.’

‘What is her name?’

‘Rukmini. T. V. Rukmini. She has just come from England. She has been there two years studying psychology.’

Videhi had never before known anyone straight from England. She felt anxious to meet this Rukmini. It sounded a nice name. She repeated it to herself. After a few days, Ganesh said Rukmini was coming to have tea with them. He seemed to have lost his ill feeling. Shalini was pleased and Videhi delighted. But when Rukmini came she was very shy. They all spoke in English because Rukmini knew only that language and

Tamil. At first she only smiled at Videhi, who was hiding behind a chair.

‘Usually,’ said Shalini, ‘she is such a chatterbox.’

Videhi kept silent and stared at Rukmini, at the darker Tamil face, and the vivid red and green sari, silk and worn Madrassi fashion, and the thick black hair, and the diamond ear-rings and the eyes that flashed at times as bright as the diamonds. The adults were just making conversation and Videhi did not listen. She was transfixed with the vision of Rukmini. She thought her more beautiful than anything she had ever seen, and more wonderful perhaps than the gods in the temples.

She could not tell what it was that impressed her so much. Rukmini was younger than her mother, yet more mature, more possessed. She was different in dress and style, with a superior elegance. She spoke softly but clearly and always with authority. Videhi liked her and wanted to have her as a friend. She came across from behind her chair and put her hand in that of Rukmini’s and smiled shyly at her. Rukmini gave her a jasmin bud from her hair and, in pulling it out, dropped a hairpin. Videhi was happy to pick it up.

‘You must come to my room,’ said Rukmini, ‘and I will show you some nice English books.’

So began her friendship with Rukmini. As soon as she knew school was finished Videhi would rush over to Rukmini’s room. There was a small bed there with a fine Lucknow coverlet, a chair, a writing-desk with an electric fan on it, and a bookshelf. Rukmini had so many books. Most of them were quite beyond Videhi’s comprehension save as books, but there were a few picture books that she liked to look at. Above all, she loved to listen to Rukmini talk, and to watch her write her letters or mark the girls’ exercise books. She always

seemed to have a letter to write and a pile of books to mark. Videhi wondered if she would ever be as clever as that.

She learnt little English songs and poems from Rukmini and recited them rather sweetly. She learnt very quickly with Rukmini, whereas with her father she had been a slow learner. Shalini, too, came often to Rukmini's room. She would talk quietly whilst Rukmini was working or resting. Sometimes they talked about the school and the value of modern education for girls in India, or her books. They felt within themselves some vein of the author and thrilled at the common touch. Both were adamant for freedom. They never discussed love, but sometimes lovers in story. Shalini was sure that Rukmini was in love herself, but some reticence and a strong pride kept Rukmini from any confidence on this matter.

Shalini was happy that she had found a new friend and that Videhi had found, as it were, a second home and was so fond of Rukmini. Videhi did not think at all, but every day she came to Rukmini bringing flowers and every day she sat and worshipped.

One day Rukmini went to the bazaar and bought Videhi a big English doll. She was very pleased. It was nearly as large as a real baby. Now she could be a mother by herself. She had never before had so expensive a toy. She got her mother to stitch some little frocks, and was always with the doll, its round pink face and staring blue eyes contrasting strangely with her own thin face and shining pools of darkness. Rukmini took a photograph of Videhi sitting on the edge of her bed, holding the doll, and smiling a little nervously as she faced the camera. She was happy and proud when she received her copy of the little snap. She felt for the first time individual.

She used to post letters for Rukmini. The post office was in the road just outside the compound. Sometimes she bought stamps and sometimes she just took the letters. She never wondered what was in them. It was natural to her to take them for granted. Strange how a child could be so uncurious. Yet, when Rukmini brought something from the bazaar, a sari, or a blouse-piece, she was eager to see it and touch it and feel it against her face.

Her greatest delight was to go to the bazaar with Rukmini. First Videhi would call a servant to fetch a tonga. Then they would wait until the jingle of the horse's bells told them that the tonga had arrived. Some of the tongas were dirty and Rukmini would scold the servant for bringing such a one. Still, they got in and drove out with a flourish of whip by the tonga driver and much shouting. Videhi often acted as interpreter although she knew that Rukmini was familiar with Hindi now. It pleased her to help in this way.

They went very quickly through the roads, passing the pan shops, the people and the bullocks, into Chowk. Here every shop was a paradise. There were so many rich sari shops where one could buy the heavy Benarsi saris, or the gilt silk pieces, and then there were the brass shops full of fine ware and richly coloured enamels, and then there were cheaper shops where one could buy everything from candles to sanitary towels. Videhi liked these shops, for they were always full of interesting things, American fountainpens, Japanese goods, torches, padlocks, all kinds of soaps, cigarettes and paper. It looked such a jumble inside. One just sat down on a form and an assistant would come. Whatever was wanted he would pull down in a moment. Always he seemed to have to reach to some shelf, but always he knew where it was. At the end they would pay the cashier, who sat on a

white sheet on the floor in front of his heavy brass-bound desk with his great red roll of account books. Then there was the shoe shop where they bought sandals. They seemed to get these very often, for the leather straps burst quickly. There was the dentist who did his operations in the open, and had a great signboard showing a huge face bristling with monster teeth, and on its head a curious American hat. Videhi always shuddered a little at that. Then there were the cloth shops where men would unroll yards and yards of lovely cloth. They sold blankets there and rugs for the bed. Rukmini bought one there once, but Videhi spent her time watching one of the assistants show another customer, who seemed hard to please, rolls and rolls of cloth. How rich one would have to be to be able to buy that, she thought, and how fine it would be to have all that cloth at home. Then there were chemist and drug stores. She liked the smells in these shops.

Then the return home laden with parcels, always something for herself and sometimes something for Shalini. She would call Shalini to Rukmini's room, or often enough they would stop at Shalini's house and display their purchases.

'I bought this, Shalini,' she would say, for she called her mother by her name, 'and Rukmini bought this blouse-piece for you,' she would add, and pull out the small roll of silk.

Her mother would admire it, and then offer to make tea Poona fashion, and Rukmini would refuse and say that they must have coffee in her room. They would all troop across the compound.

How nice it was to make the coffee! Rukmini would pump the spirit stove, but it was usually Shalini who lit it in the end, then the milk would be boiled, and the water for the coffee go into the little brass percolator,

and then they would drink out of brass tumblers very hot. Videhi could not hold them, but Shalini and Rukmini managed easily. All the time they were laughing and talking happily together. Usually they ended with Shalini saying she must go home to cook and Rukmini pointing to a pile of exercise books she had to correct. Videhi would stay in silence whilst Rukmini marked in red ink. She liked to see the clean, fresh, glistening red ink and longed to be able to use it herself some day.

Videhi was four now and soon would be going to school. She could have gone already, for there was a very good kindergarten department in her father's school, but it was in another part of Kashi. To go she would have to travel by bus every day. Shalini did not like the idea of sending her off, though she would have been in the school bus with the other children. Ganesh did not like the extra expense. When she was five she could go to the girl's school where both Ganesh and Rukmini taught. Meanwhile, she was growing in intelligence and, through her close friendship with Rukmini, had become quite fluent in colloquial English.

Rukmini taught logic in the school, and also English to the senior girls. She was very popular. Videhi often met the older girls in Rukmini's room. They were quite bold, asking her in a teasing fashion what love meant and if she were in love. Rukmini had a modern, open mind and thought that India, especially her womenfolk, needed the breath of freedom and the strength of knowledge. She believed these were to be found in Western minds because they were individual. Videhi remembered some of the words of Rukmini in reply to the arguments of the girls. They were frequently talking about the ways of the East and those of the West, and free love, and romance, and orthodoxy. Rukmini

refused to be drawn into such arguments. There is no East or West in knowledge she said, no East or West in behaviour; and there is no love that is not free. You must not imagine that you can choose free love. Choice does arise. You will discover that if love comes it is free. The girls were clamorous at this kind of talk, for they would ask what they were to do when marriages were arranged for them.

‘If you believe in something sincerely, you will know how to act bravely,’ said Rukmini.

To Shalini she would say, ‘What can they do? When they leave school they will be married; they will become the wives of some rich men, shut off from life. All our teaching, all our school ideals, all our talk of the future of India is just meaningless.’

‘Perhaps they will be happy,’ said Shalini.

‘What can they know of happiness in such a state?’ asked Rukmini. ‘They’ll be well fed, well clothed, well housed, but with no life worth calling life. They might as well have been born in the eighteenth century, or the first century. India has changed so little, and the great blanket of orthodoxy smothers us still.’

Such ideas Videhi heard but hardly understood. Those were happy days. Wrapped in affection, her mother and father happy, her adoration for Rukmini, and the feeling of certainty, and the joy in the routine of her life, all contributed to enrich her memory. The talk that she occasionally followed did not trouble her. If it meant anything at all, it was a brighter light in their life, an indication that they belonged to the future when such bright hopes might be realised. Life was golden and there were no problems.

Chapter Two

IN THE spring came Vasant Panchmi, the festival when all the boys and girls dressed in bright daffodil-yellow clothes and played. She remembered that one. The earlier ones had passed her by. She had good reason to remember this. She herself dressed in yellow clothes and played with the other girls, no longer an infant, a baby, but a growing child soon to be a girl and a woman. Then, at this time, she learnt that Shalini was going to have a baby; that soon, in a few months, she would have a brother or a sister. She hoped for a sister, but she knew Ganesh wanted a son. Ganesh felt it must be a son. Shalini wanted a son for Ganesh's sake, and for her own, that it might mean an end of childbearing, for she was not strong. Videhi felt nor heard none of this. She wanted a sister to play with. The little boys in the compound were dirty and rude. She did not like them. A sister would be lovely, better than the doll Rukmini had given her. How happy she would be when the child was born. She was glad to see the evidence of its growth in Shalini. Pregnant women were common enough in the compound, let alone the streets. She felt it was lovely for her mother to have another child, but no mystery. Her joy grew. It was in that gay, bright, sunny Vasant Panchmi, with its fluttering yellow dresses and its new hopes for Videhi, that she grew closest to Rukmini.

In all this activity and happiness Videhi had her share. Yet, apart from the impression of continuous activity, of more shopping, more talking, and an even closer intimacy between her mother and Rukmini, little else

remained. The details had slipped from her mind. But there was a whole and permanent picture, fixed despite all later experiences, as a lovely thing, bright with colour, with fragrance and with grace. In that picture her mother and, above all, Rukmini were the major images, the real goddesses of her earliest memory, enshrined in Kashi, which had for her its own spell. She had first seen, and could still see, the great river on a moonlit night, and the dark of the temples on the ghats, and the faint glow in the distance of some burning pyre. She loved the crowded streets and the little shops, never finding them dirty or mean. She loved Kashi when the crowds of pilgrims came. Outside the city it was so easy to get into the fields, green with young wheat or thick with sugar-cane. Not a memory of that time stained or hurt.

She thought back on Rukmini, trying to discover some reason, some intellectual explanation for that early childish devotion of hers. She was foolish to look for reasons for love. Love and affection grow like the wild flowers, suddenly, unexpectedly. Too often we try to kill them, and they do not thrive in ordered cultivation. Still, she said to herself, the red poppy flaunts itself in wheat all the world over, and it is always lovely. She was glad her life had begun in a fountain of love, and still felt refreshed from it. Yet it was strange to her now that she could see so little into Rukmini's heart or soul. She remembered how she had played and talked, the rooms, the house, the compound in Kashi, the shops; the physical things came quickly and clearly back into her mind. Beyond a few echoes of conversation that she thought she remembered, and that lovely dawn-like glow of golden radiance, nothing remained.

She could see Rukmini now in her red sari with a heavy gold border, a gold silk blouse, and jasmin in her

hair. She could see her concentrate before her mirror as she put first the oil and then the kunkum to make the tika on her forehead. The image after all these years came back, yet she could not fix it or discover the sources of her emotions.

She spent now more time at home in the very hot weather, for Shalini would not let her go so frequently to Rukmini's house. At first Videhi found this dull, but not for long, for the great event of the birth of a child was to come, and Videhi used to dream about her new sister. Moreover, there was the additional excitement of the approaching holiday. In a few days Shalini and Ganesh were going to take her to the hills during the hot summer weeks. Best of all, Rukmini was also coming. Videhi had never been to the hills before, never known the special thrill of a holiday away from home.

It was pleasant to recall these details and to fix them one by one into the mosaic that made up the picture of her childhood's first beginning. Strange, though, that there was so little character, so little personality. The few adults of her life then, Shalini, Rukmini and Ganesh, were like beings of power, gods or goddesses. She accepted them as though they had always been. That they had fears and hopes of their own at that stage was unknown to her. She supposed the happiness of childhood rested on this ignorance of necessities such as food and clothes and a house and money.

Videhi realised with later experience and knowledge that the holiday in the hills to which she so much looked forward was also a kind of honeymoon for Shalini, an effort on her mother's part to renew not love, but its freshness and strength and hopes. Shalini was still young and able and intelligent. Without positively admitting it to herself, she was beginning to fret as she saw herself falling into the traditional role of Indian

woman, the bearer of children, the mother: a role in which the player surrendered her personality and individuality: a role in which the past swallowed the future. And in India it was becoming a tedious tale told too often.

• Shalini's mind rebelled against it, though her instincts accepted it. All her reading, all her thought, that of the friends about them, of Ganesh himself, all this was progressive. They were happy to talk in terms of freedom. They were proud to feel that they might be, should be able to live these thoughts and depart from the old traditional ways which had led India into such servitude and decay. Shalini in all this was very sincere, and what she thought good she thought possible to live. But though those early years of her married life had been happy, they had not been enough. Videhi later felt this deeply. For what her mother had endured had become part of her.

She could look back on this holiday in Rajpur, a hill village a few miles from Dehra Dun, with a renewed curiosity, seeing it as a child with its few colourful incidents vividly painted on her memory, seeing it as the beginning of new experiences for Rukmini, though these she could only imaginatively reconstruct, and seeing it finally as a signal episode in her mother's life, an appeal to renew love and an effort to assert her own right to independence of personality.

Ganesh also must have looked upon this holiday as a landmark. The burden of most of the arrangements had fallen on him, finding the advertisement in the Allahabad paper, writing off about terms, enquiring about trains, listing what it was necessary to take. It represented a big achievement for him, and a considerable expense of money that he half doubted he could afford.

In this effort to recall the past more details, unrelated in sequence to the main picture, came to her. She remembered once being ill. Fever of one kind or another was common enough. What it was then that she had she did not know, but she could recall the fat smiling doctor, his bald head and his stethoscope, and his gently feeling her pulse. And she remembered that bitter medicine, red in colour, horrible to taste, that they always seemed to give to bring down the temperature. Her mother would tempt her with a spoon of medicine in one hand and a sweet in the other. She remembered, too, the trouble as a child with washing her hair. She washed in the garden at the back of the house, and Ganesh or Shalini would pour water over her from a great earthen jar. She liked that, but she hated it when they rubbed the soapsuds into her hair and the soap got into her eyes. Even worse was it getting her hair combed and plaited and tied with ribbons. It seemed she was never still enough and Shalini was always scolding her. Afterwards she would have to be good and not get herself disarranged. Then the swing in the garden. She had almost forgotten that. Yet how often had she sat there, slowly swinging and making herself cool whilst Ganesh worked in the garden or Shalini in the house. Then the little shelf in one of the rooms where were all her precious possessions, a few books, A B C's in English and Marathi, her doll, and her little clay toys, and a purse and some lovely glass bangles that a friend had given her. Time passed, it was true, but it came back vividly and sweetly and with loveliness.

She tried to think what of the future Videhi they revealed, but without much success. Anyone, perhaps, might have had that childhood. Yet on second thoughts it was surely not true. Others who had lived in Kashi

could remember similar sights and sounds and could recall with joy the fragrance, the colour, the crowds, the variety and the interest. What she was remembering was only external. Her little life had its shallow root in the love of Ganesh and Shalini, and this was unique. Her mother's and her father's characters were also developing and working upon her. For all that, and for all the long years she had lived and grown with them, in some ways they were strangers to her. Love bound them to her, but the love and familiarity of domestic life blurred the outlines. As parents they were both too near and too remote from her mind. They seemed fixed and certain to Videhi, though to themselves never final, never rested, never arrived. They had not ended. They were trying to do what people throughout all the ages had done, and trying to be different, to be modern, and trying to discover themselves.

Chapter Three

THEY had to leave at five in the morning to catch the train at the cantonment station. They were up at four. The previous day they had packed their trunks with the clothes they would need and the books they would read. Last thing at night they had packed the bulk of the kitchen utensils, for they had to take with them everything. All that remained now in the early morning was to roll up their bedding and tie it securely, to pack the last few kitchen dishes, to get water in the surai for the journey, and to wait for the tongas. Ganesh had ordered two of these, one for his own family and one for Rukmini. As they got up in the last dark

of night they could see each other's lights in their respective rooms. They all had tea in Shalini's place to save extra trouble.

In a few moments the tingle of the tonga bells was heard and they loaded their luggage. Videhi was surprised to see how it all went on. She had thought it would never fit in. Then they got on the tongas and went off. Videhi was happy and excited with Rukmini. It was not far to the station, a straight run in the early-morning empty road of about ten minutes. The coolies took off their luggage whilst Shalini and Rukmini counted their pieces. Ganesh went off to buy tickets for them all. In a short while they were together on the platform waiting for the train to come.

The train came in and they found a compartment inter class very nearly empty with just one sleepy passenger. Then they were off. Dawn was just breaking over Kashi bridge, and Videhi, peering through the open window, beyond the great girders of the bridge, could see the swirling waters of the Ganges below. She flung out an anna and heard it rattle off the bridge to fall into the waters deep below. They said it was lucky to make such an offering to Mother Ganga. On and on the train went. People got in and out. Vendors came by at the stations: boys with knives, boys with fans (they bought one of these each), boys with cigarettes and pan, men with sweets, and men with toys. Incessantly they ran up and down the waiting train crying out their wares.

It was amusing, thought Videhi, to watch the poor people crowding into the third-class compartments. So many wanted to get in and so many wanted to get out. They all had big bundles, or straw baskets or great, earthen jars, and the men had big sticks, and the women their children.

On the other platforms they could see people lying

down sleeping, patiently waiting for their trains. Up and down strode the Anglo-Indian railway guard, pompous and important in his uniform with his flag and whistle. They spent all day in the train; it was rather tiring and hot and they were all continuously thirsty. Night came and Videhi and Shalini were able to stretch themselves on the seat and doze off, covered by a thin shawl. Videhi liked to be so close to her mother again. She could feel her mother's heart beat as she held tight to her soft warm body. With the night came a coolness in the air. It was also rather frightening. The train stopped at stations in the darkness and people still got in and out. Videhi wondered if their luggage would be safe. She hoped her doll would not be broken with all this rattling and jolting. She clung closer to her mother. Then came the grey dawn and the sudden brightness of day. By noon they would reach Dehra Dun. Every station now was one less. She talked excitedly to Rukmini.

It was not possible to wash properly in the train, and for the better part of the time they kept the windows wide open to let in the fresh air. Only in the heat of the afternoon did they close the wooden shutters. All were quite dusty, their skin hot, stretched and dry, and there were bits of coal-dust in their hair.

'As soon as we get to Rajpur we'll wash it all off,' said Shalini.

They were counting the boxes again now in increasing anxiety. Then they rolled up their bedding which they had used at night, just a rug each and a pillow, and had everything tied ready for the departure from the train.

With a sigh the train steamed into Dehra Dun, and Videhi was full of happiness that they had arrived. They got out and called coolies to take their luggage, again counting it. Ganesh went off to hire a bus. He came

back saying, 'They want five rupees. That is too much. We'll go by tonga. It is not too far.'

'No,' said Shalini, who was very tired. 'We'll go by bus. Five rupees is not too dear.'

The bus was small and tinny, and it had hard wooden seats, but it held them all and their luggage. Very shortly they left the dusty streets of Dehra Dun, and were on the main road leading to the hills. Rajpur was three thousand feet up, but there was no impression of height. Videhi was disappointed. She had expected to see masses of great craggy rocks on the pinnacles of which they would perch. This hardly seemed like hills at all. It was a village with a small line of shops by the roadside, and the large compound with cottages for people on holiday like themselves. The road had been brown and dusty and the journey tiring, but once within the compound there was a world of greenery and calm, and the cottages were delightful. There were about six of these, and the two they had between them were the only ones then occupied. Videhi felt they would be private and alone.

Videhi was very happy running from Rukmini's cottage to her own and watching each unpack. First they unrolled their bedding and spread it in the sunlight on the bare ground so that it might be cleansed of the train smells in the fresh air of the latter half of the day. Then they unpacked the kitchen things and set about preparing a meal. Shalini took out a towel and soap and clean clothes for Videhi so that she could bathe at once. Shalini went on cooking and unpacking. Their first meal in Rajpur was a picnic, and to Videhi it was exciting. After the meal she wanted to go again to Rukmini's, but Shalini said, 'No. It is getting late, and you need to rest to be fresh for tomorrow.' Shalini herself was tired, with a headache, and rather cross.

She called Ganesh to help her with the beds. They

had to fit bamboo sticks for the mosquito nets, and it was not easy. As soon as the beds were ready Shalini asked Videhi to get in. She was tired, but pleasantly, and not so tired as to want to sleep at once. She lay awake quite a while listening to the evening sounds and staring at the shapes of trees through the mosquito netting. Neither her mother nor father spoke. Shalini was weary with the train journey and the work of getting settled. Ganesh was displeased with something. He felt the scene and place romantic and wanted Shalini to share the romance with him. He was vexed that she had not changed her travel-soiled sari. Shalini had said that she would sleep in the same sari and change in the morning, she was too tired to bother now. She felt that with the child within her she wanted love, not romance.

Shalini got into bed thankful for the chance of rest and Ganesh silently joined her. Shalini was unresponsive. She accepted him passively without enthusiasm because she was weary, and without fear because she was already pregnant. Her passivity might have been termed resentment, though the thought did not enter her head. All she wanted was for it to be over quickly and the blessed dark to come, and the throbbing in her aching body to cease. Before long night gave her peace, and Videhi slept dreaming of her doll.

Next morning was as many future mornings. Ganesh with Rukmini and Videhi went out for a walk. They could go along the road to the little line of shops. These had grains and a few vegetables to sell. There was also a moneylender's shop and a post office. They went there the first morning, but then afterwards only if they had need to. Then they could strike up a path to the hills, all rather brown and dusty, and slowly clamber upwards and look to the road that led to Mussoorie some twenty miles away. Videhi used to think that only the very

rich could afford to go to Mussoorie. In the daytime it was just a blur in the hills, for it was quite hot in Rajpur and the rains had not yet come to settle the dust. At night-time the lights showed from roads and bungalows, and in the distance they shone as from one fairy palace. Or they could go across one of the hills into a stone quarry. This was a lovely place for Videhi. The floor of the quarry was thick with stone chippings, and many of them were beautifully shaped and coloured. It was her delight to collect these stones, so that she could take them back to Kashi as great treasure.

There were two other walks, one to a stream with warm shallow pools where one could sit in the water or paddle in it, and another across many fields to a small gorge where there were sulphur springs. Shalini stayed away from these walks. She had, she said, work to do. Also, she was unwell and unwilling to risk the occasional climbs up stones and the sudden descents. Videhi was quite happy because she was still with Rukmini and she did not mind leaving her mother behind. She knew, however, that Shalini minded, that she was angry with Ganesh for going on these walks and always leaving her behind. She expressed her anger to Ganesh in sudden short sarcastic bursts, speaking, of course, in Marathi. She said it was nice to be alone in the hills and watch the distant clouds form, or the line of the trees along the hills' back.

Ganesh understood and was angry. He knew that Shalini in her present physical state needed to take care of herself and of the child to come, but he thought she might have tried to come on the shorter walks, or be more accommodating about her absence. He was angry at her failure to be so, even to attempt to come out. He was even angrier at Shalini's occasional spoken resentment, and felt that this was quite unjustified. He was

aware that Shalini had expected something new, a second spring, something fine and wonderful from this holiday. He shared unspoken with her the belief and the hope that it might contain a renewal of their love, that in the foothills so close to the Himalayas they might gather fresh strength together. From the beginning, however, he had seen no signs of this, yet could likewise not see himself at fault.

Because he loved Shalini and naturally desired her, he came to her each night. To Shalini each day had been the same, wearisome, lonely and disappointing, and she was unable to welcome him. The more her physical apathy was apparent, the more angry Ganesh became and the more determined to prove by loving her that he did love her, and that if anyone was at fault it was not he. Shalini felt that her silent submission was better than a protest. Nor did she want to protest. Her ideas may have been modern but her instincts were those of the age-old Indian woman who had submitted from girlhood as girl wives to the embraces of their husbands. If it pleased Ganesh, it was good; if it did not, she did not care. She felt heavy with the new life within her and was unwilling to argue or ask for other treatment.

Her unhappiness was apparent to Rukmini, though they did not discuss it at all. Shalini hoped that it was concealed from Videhi. Videhi was aware of a sense of uneasiness between her parents. She knew her mother was not enjoying the holiday as she was enjoying it. All the time Shalini was free from cooking and tidying she was making little things for the new baby. They talked less about it now, whether it was to be a boy or a girl. Ganesh was silent because he felt that his wish for it to be a boy was so strong that it could only express itself in a contempt for girls and women, and he did not wish to hurt either his wife or his daughter with such words.

Shalini wanted the burden of birth to be over, and hoped that the new child might protect her from Ganesh until they both felt happier and more spontaneous.

Ganesh made efforts on his part to get Shalini out. One day they all went down to Dehra Dun in a tonga to the cinema and saw an American film. Technically it was quite a good film, but its values were childish and blatantly wrong. Ganesh, on the return journey, denounced it as a typical product of the materialist West. He spoke harshly of the West and its loose women, inferring that they were all loose, and that that was where modernism led to. And he praised India with its ancient ways and its ancient virtues. Videhi remembered this. Speaking now of something he loved, even if mistakenly, he was eloquent and affecting. He said that in ancient India and in the India of today there is nothing finer than the orthodox Hindu wife. She represents a richer plane of values. Shalini was silent. She had enjoyed the film, trivial as it was, and was now ready to forget it. Rukmini, however, would have liked to take Ganesh up and ask him what he really meant by an orthodox wife, but she knew any such discussion would embarrass Shalini. For in orthodoxy were included so many things, not only the sexual submissiveness which Ganesh had in mind, but the superstition and the ignorance, and the insistence that others in the same family circle should also be bound, and, worst of all, the gross intolerance of the orthodox, their refusal to admit the outsider into their fold, and their refusal to accept his values even in his own sphere of life. Videhi was happy. She had not understood the film. But she had loved the foreign dresses. She wondered, however, why European women in India were so ugly and so badly dressed when those on the films seemed so beautiful.

Ganesh planned another outing for them all. They would go to the sulphur springs. They were supposed to be medicinal for people suffering from rheumatism. The place was about five miles away, too far for Shalini to walk, although most of the way was flat over fields along the sides of the hills and not up them at all. However, he would get coolies and a palanquin for Shalini, and a coolie to carry their things, for they would have a picnic out there and prepare their own food.

In a day or two they set off early in the morning to avoid the midday heat. The journey was not hard. Videhi rather liked it. She would run ahead with Ganesh and then back to Shalini in her palanquin. It was very flat and through fields. They met few people. All the time they had been in Rajpur they had seen few people, and certainly no children. Videhi had not felt lonely. On they went. It was surely farther than five miles, and the heat was increasing. After walking for well over two hours they reached the place. It was a cleft or small valley with steep rocky sides and rocks at the bottom. There were little pools, a small waterfall and a narrow continuous stream of water, and over everywhere a strong and nauseating smell of sulphur.

Videhi was delighted with the water and did not mind the smell. It was easy and safe to slip down the edges of the valley to the flat rocks and pools, and none of these were at all deep. The adults halted on top and set about preparing their food. It was unsheltered and hot. If they wanted coolness they had, however, only to walk down to the pools and walk in those. There were no other people present and the coolies had disappeared.

After a very simple lunch they washed the dishes in mud and running water, and then looked about somewhere for a shelter from the heat. Now it was becoming really hot. Luckily they found a kind of cave in the side

of the valley, fairly clean, and on its rocky floor they all lay down. Here it was dark and cool with no strain on the eyes, and from the outside, where the brilliance of day showed, they could hear the pleasant sound of falling water. Soon some of them were asleep. Videhi dozed off, for she had eaten a big lunch. Shalini remained awake talking quietly to Rukmini. She felt slightly in pain and was a bit worried. Then the pain left her.

'A woman is only safe with a job,' said Shalini. 'It is her one protection. If more women in India had jobs, there would be some chance for social improvement.'

'You gave up your own job,' said Rukmini, 'and I am sure you liked your work very much, and I am sure, too, that you made a better teacher than Ganesh.'

'One has to,' said Shalini. 'There seems no escape once one is married. And yet it should be possible for a woman to have a career of her own.'

'You don't think, then, that marriage is a career?' asked Rukmini.

'It is not at all the same thing. In marriage you will find increasing burdens and less and less rewards. You don't discover yourself. You lose yourself.'

'Do you think that is always the case?'

'Who knows always?' answered Shalini a little bitterly. 'One has only to look at all the married women one knows, and the answer is plain enough. Whether they care or not, whether they feel or not, it is hard to tell, but it is certain they have accepted defeat. I am not going to accept defeat, and I am not going to let Videhi accept defeat.'

Shalini spoke vehemently as though to give her will strength, and more to convince herself than Rukmini.

'Yes,' continued Shalini. 'Just now the hopes are pleasant, and are dreams to comfort one, but when the children come then the hopes become sharper, edged

as it were with pain. I feel now that if only I can bring up Videhi to be independent and happy I don't care about myself or even the rest. I want her to be all that I should have been.'

'Decisions and plans are not so easy to make,' answered Rukmini. 'I sometimes believe in our old faith, that our lives are ordained by our past lives, and we go on and on, suffering and enduring and experiencing, letting things happen to us, because we cannot prevent them.'

Ganesh woke with a start.

'We must get back soon,' he said. 'The night will come.'

He went out to call the coolies. Videhi awoke, too, and stretched herself. Shalini got up wearily. They packed their things and began the slow journey home. It was tiring and long. Videhi got into the palanquin with Shalini whilst the others walked. All were slightly depressed. Ganesh felt that it had not been a successful day. He could see no fault of his own in the preparations, and spoke somewhat bitterly to Rukmini as they walked together of how useless it was to try to do things. All planned pleasures fail. One tries so hard to give happiness and a kind of barrenness results.

By now it was dusk and they passed more quickly through the fields. The coolies were singing a hill song. Here and there a little fire glowed outside a villager's hut. Over in the distance they could see the dark purple of the hills, swollen now to some majesty in the evening. Then in one part they saw the thin line of fire so lovely, so distant, so bright.

'That is a forest fire,' said Ganesh. 'If the rains do not break soon there will be more of them. Every year just before the monsoon they come.'

Videhi peeped out of the palanquin to look. In the

dark and the distance she expected to see a great burst of flames, but all she saw was the thin line of fire.

‘It is hardly a fire at all,’ she said to Shalini.

‘It will be big enough and bad enough in the forest,’ said Shalini. ‘We are many miles away. Now it glitters like some delicate necklace.’

She did not talk any more. She was tired and her body was aching. She was feeling the strain of pregnancy. She felt as though the time had come to make some decision. She must have a long talk with Ganesh tonight and get him to see her point of view about Videhi. What was her point of view? she suddenly asked herself. Not to be tied to a post, came the answer. Some sense of freedom; not just marriage and the bearing of children. If only the men could bear the children for a change!

They were home. They said good night to each other. They would not bother about an evening meal. Shalini began to make the beds and Videhi helped. Now that it was dark they had to be very careful with the mosquito nets. They fixed them, and then Videhi got inside with a torch and looked carefully in the corners and all over the net to see if there were any mosquitoes there. Those she saw she killed with her hand.

‘It is time for you to sleep,’ said Shalini. ‘Go and wash and then get into bed.’

‘We’ll all go to bed,’ said Ganesh.

‘No,’ answered Shalini. ‘Let the child go first. I want to talk with you.’

‘There’ll be time enough in the morning,’ said Ganesh. ‘I’m tired now, and I can see that you, too, are tired. Let us all sleep.’

Shalini sighed: she felt full of aches and pains and too weary to argue. If he did not want to talk, then let it be. Perhaps there would come an opportunity in the

morning. She knew no opportunity would come; there would be the work and the others, and in the bright day how could one suddenly discuss the future? Besides, what had she to discuss? She really wanted to ask that she herself should become free, and Ganesh would not understand that. He would ask, if she dared put the words that way, what of their love? What of her duty? And what of her position as a wife, as a Hindu wife? She knew it would be hard to find an answer in words to such questions, for they were not on the same plane as her own thoughts. She still loved Ganesh. She loved him desperately almost. Of course she knew her duty and her loyalty. Tossing through the hot night, she wondered what was in the mind of Sita when she was with Rama. Was Sita just a poetic myth, an idol that had been fashioned to enchain Indian womanhood, or was it true that she was womanly perfection and the very crown of wifedom? She could not sleep. Perhaps she was imagining trouble where there was none. She was restless and ill at ease, and all these thoughts were a product of her sickness. She turned to one side. Ganesh heard the creak of her bed and came over. Shalini just closed her eyes in dull apathy.

Chapter Four

THEY awoke to a burst of thunder and a fall of rain, a few big drops only, and then it passed over. 'We'll get a downpour soon,' said Ganesh, 'The monsoon is here.'

The sky was thick and heavy with racing clouds and towards midday the heat was intense. Shalini had stayed

in bed because she felt ill and Rukmini came over to talk to her and help her. Videhi played with the stones she had taken from the quarry. That afternoon the rain fell continuously and heavily for over an hour with great bursts of thunder and flashes of lightning. They were surprised when the rain ceased how cold it became. Videhi had run out to dance in the rain; she loved it. She was soaking wet and very cold. The cottages had hearths and they soon had a big wood fire blazing. It was lovely to sit and watch. But Shalini felt still ill, and she told Ganesh they ought to go back to Kashi. She would feel safer there if her baby came earlier. And she felt that the secret purpose of their holiday had failed. Videhi was aghast at the idea of going back to Kashi so soon, especially as Rukmini was staying another month.

‘We’ve only been here a month, Shalini. Can’t we stay? Can’t I stay with Rukmini then?’

Shalini felt that would not be right and said so. Ganesh seemed indifferent. He was hurt that the holiday had ended so, but perhaps it was better for Shalini to be back in Kashi, though it would still be very hot there, for the monsoon would not reach the city for another month.

The packing began. Videhi got all her stones together and went on one final trip to the quarry to get fresh and better ones. She was proud of her collection. She had got over the disappointment of not staying on, and was eager for the great adventure of the long railway journey back.

The day they left it rained heavily and continuously. Their things got wet loading them into the bus, and their clothes too. It was late afternoon when they left. They would catch the train in the evening and be in Kashi the mid-afternoon of the next day. Ganesh bought third-class tickets.

'We cannot afford any more,' he said to Shalini.

She was hurt.

'Just for this journey,' she said. 'We can economise in Kashi. We can easily save the money there. Let us at least travel comfortably.'

'There's no time to change,' said Ganesh.

'Oh, I'm sure there is if you hurry,' said Shalini. 'Please, just for Videhi's sake.'

'No,' said Ganesh. 'We have not the money. We have been living beyond our means on this holiday.'

'You regret it then?' asked Shalini.

'Yes,' said Ganesh. 'I do. It was a foolish romantic gesture.'

'Videhi liked it at least.'

'Yes, of course she did, but she would have been just as happy at home.'

Shalini said no more. They got into their compartment and sat on the hard wooden seats. As the train started from Dehra Dun it was not crowded, and she felt perhaps she had been unfair in pressing upon Ganesh her desire to travel in the better class. Videhi heard the words with unhappiness but without understanding. It was the first time she had been aware of any open difference between her parents. She knew they were angry with each other but could not discover cause for anger. Money was beyond her comprehension, even more the sense of frustration at wishes unsatisfied, the anger two people feel when they love each other yet are aware that their loves are hurtful rather than pleasing, and the bitterness and emptiness that comes of the slow unwilling realisation that love perhaps is not enough. What is left if we take away love? If love fails, life fails and all else is blackness and misery.

The train started and Videhi looked out to see the last of Dehra Dun. Her unhappiness passed away as the

train went by the villages and the green fields. She could still see the people at work, especially the women-folk with their torn dull red saris. The rain had fallen here also and touched up all the colours with light. Here and there she could see a great black buffalo wallowing in the mud, happy and careless of the world.

'You packed my stones, didn't you, Shalini?' she asked. 'You are quite sure?'

'Yes,' answered her mother.

Neither Shalini nor Ganesh spoke to each other, and Videhi soon fell under the spell of the angry oppressive silence. People got in at each station, and Shalini knew that they would have to sit through the night on their hard wooden seats. There would be no chance of lying down. She felt more than ever tired and aching. The rattle of the train gave her a headache. The poor people inside with them were talking with loud peasant voices. Some of the men were smoking bidis, and the strong pungent smell of raw tobacco burning made her sick. A woman got in at the station just before dusk, her face hideously marked with smallpox, her sari a dirty stained white. She had one child at the breast and three others quite young, all thin and ill-looking, eyes bright and stomachs distended. Just like mine, thought Shalini. Yet probably that woman was beautiful once before sickness born of ignorance and maternity ate into her, ageing her. Shalini closed her eyes and tried not to think. Videhi had dozed off now and was half across her lap. She put an arm round her to hold her tight. Darkness came and the train went on thudding through the night. Shalini could not sleep, and she knew Ganesh was awake too. The compartment was very crowded. There was luggage at her feet, hurting her, but there was no escape, no escape until the dawn came and then Kashi.

Through the dark the train continued. The lights of the stations they stopped at dazzled and hurt. Outside sometimes, at a smaller station, there were just a few dim lights, and Shalini felt this as a blessed relief. Occasionally another train passed them with a rush of fire and smoke and a flashing line of carriages. Shalini thought to herself how all over India there were little trains with their lights rushing through the darkness. It was a wonderful network; each train a monster of fire, relentlessly, effortlessly doing its duty. And so it went on. All through the night and every night; if only one could look down on it all and see the great darkness of India and the flashing streams of fire. It was beautiful. It was purposeful. It was inevitable. The trains might be late, but they got home, their task accomplished, ready to start again. If only, she thought, our lives were like that, so certain, so sure and useful.

Dawn brought a relief. They got some water to drink and just waited for Kashi to come. How pleased they were to see the Ganges again from the bridge. Somehow they got out of the crowded train. Shalini waited whilst Ganesh struggled to get the luggage out and then went for coolies.

They were back at last in their own home. Shalini said she would make a meal whilst Ganesh unpacked, for the sheets and bedding needed to be spread in the sun. Videhi went through their rooms.

'How dusty they have become, Shalini,' she cried, and put her finger through the dust. Then she ran out into the garden at the back and brought in some jasmine buds for her mother.

'You must open my trunk now,' she said to Ganesh. 'I want to get my stones out.'

'You must bathe first, Videhi,' Shalini called to her. 'You have not bathed since we left Rajpur.'

Videhi sulked and asked if she could have her stones first.

'Let the child be,' said Ganesh. 'There's time enough for bathing.'

He got out the trunk and opened it. Her stones were there and her clothes. It seemed so long since she had had them and seen them last. How proud she would be to show them to the other children in the compound. They were lovely stones. She touched them fondly. Then, remembering what her mother had said, she took a clean set of clothes from the trunk and a towel and went off to bathe.

'You should not bully the child,' said Ganesh to Shalini.

'I did not,' said Shalini, who was busy cooking.

'Yes you did,' said Ganesh. 'You shouted at her. A child should be brought up in love, not fear.'

'I know that better than you,' said Shalini. 'She has all my love.'

'Yes,' said Ganesh, 'and I have none. That is what is wrong.'

He was proud at the angry word.

Shalini said, 'You know it is untrue. You are just using words to put yourself in the right. Love does not enter into the question. I have refused you nothing. If only . . .' and then she stopped.

She did not want to say any more in case she got really angry, and just now she wanted only rest.

'You'd better go and change and bathe,' she said, 'when Videhi has finished, and then we can all eat and rest.'

Ganesh went away and Shalini continued with her cooking. Soon Videhi returned clean and fresh.

'I am so hungry. I hope we can eat soon.'

‘Ganesh won’t be long now,’ said Shalini, ‘and the food is nearly ready. I won’t be a few minutes myself changing.’

After lunch they all felt better. They were fed and clean again. Shalini had spread a rug on the floor of the front room and they all lay down. She was so glad for the rest. Ganesh got up after a few minutes.

‘Why don’t you write a letter to Rukmini?’ she asked.

‘So soon?’ he queried.

He took a book and read. Videhi also got up and was busy with her stones and her old toys. She did not feel now the strain of the journey at all. It was hot in the little room. They shut out the sunlight with curtains and fixed the electric table fan. A neighbour came in and sat by Shalini, asking her about the holiday, about Rajpur, about the village shops and the prices, and what they had done. Videhi came in and sat near her mother as they talked. There seemed no end to it. Shalini described the place and the people. They had had a delightful time. She enjoyed it.

‘We went to an English picture,’ said Videhi. ‘You have not told her about that.’

And so it went on, and then about Shalini herself and the baby that was coming. Was she well? Did she feel fit? Was she taking proper food? Videhi felt a little shy at all this. She did not mind her mother having a baby, but she felt other people should not talk about it until it came. And then they went on to other babies born whilst Shalini was away, and the pains the mothers had experienced. So-and-so had another girl and they were all so disappointed. Videhi asked why, but the neighbour only laughed and Shalini just smiled.

It was still very hot in Kashi. There was an occasional thunderstorm with a burst of rain, but the monsoon had not yet broken. Another month remained of the holidays

and at its end Videhi would start school. They were expecting Shalini's baby about that time also. After only two or three days Videhi felt that Rajpur was a long way off, both in time and distance. Already it was almost a period, historical, a finished separate item in her life. Each day in Kashi was like the other, and she quickly fell into the old routine and felt that she had always been in it. In the morning she would play in the garden with her stones and toys. They had a meal just before midday. Then she would draw and colour on paper in the front room whilst Shalini rested. In the evening, when it was cooler, she would play in the compound with the other children, and come back hot, untidy and dirty, and would bathe, change and prepare for bed.

Ganesh had not spoken harshly again. They were on good terms back in the old familiar surroundings of home. He was a little restless and distant. Shalini thought he was worrying about the baby; as if, she smiled to herself, it is he who has to worry. She knew he was anxious for it to be a boy, and she knew also he was anxious about money. She thought once it was all over, perhaps before, she might earn some money by writing, and one afternoon, in a sudden burst of energy and inspiration, she wrote a short story. She liked writing. She liked dwelling on the motives behind actions, and trying to penetrate the minds of others. She knew she had a gift for expression. She felt she may have marred it and perhaps neglected it. She had married Ganesh for love and all that love meant. The laughter in Videhi's eyes was better than any book. Yet she still half regretted the loss, if loss it were. It is not that I want to be independent, she said to herself. I love Ganesh, and I love him the more for his weaknesses. Perhaps it is my fault, she went on. I am upset with this pregnancy. Once the child is born I will be well and

I will make Ganesh happy and then he will make me happy.

She wrote a letter to Rukmini in her neat attractive script, and in brown ink, for Ganesh liked to be different, and kept brown ink in the house instead of the standard blue.

‘My dear Rukmini,

I hope you are well and that the rain keeps you cool. I am sure it is keeping you indoors, and that you are reading the good books you took with you. I have been very lazy and have not read at all. I wrote one short story in Marathi. I will read it to you when you return. Kashi is hot, but it is beautiful at night. Though the stars are so old and far away, they make a lovely new pattern each time I look at them. Videhi misses you greatly, but she is content to play with the stones she brought from the quarry. There is much gossip in the compound but no news. When my baby is born, which should be very soon now, I shall be happy, for I shall have another to love and another to love me. Tell me about yourself. Ganesh sends his regards.

Yours affectionately,
Shalini.’

Videhi posted the letter for her mother and wondered whether Rukmini would write a letter to her that Shalini could read aloud. In a few days’ time an answer came from Rukmini to Shalini and in it was a little letter to Videhi. The commonplaces of the note were a treasure to her. The same post that brought Rukmini’s letter also brought an acknowledgement from the editor of the Marathi magazine to which Shalini had sent her story. He was going to publish it and he enclosed a small postal order. Shalini was pleased and showed

it to Ganesh. He said the money ought to have been more, and was not either enthusiastic or appreciative.

Shalini knew that for five years Videhi had been an only child and possibly spoilt. The new baby might hurt her at first in taking away much of her mother's attention. Still, a second child in the family would undoubtedly be good. Shalini slept little these days, but lay awake thinking of Ganesh, of Videhi and her future, and the baby that was to come. If only it would come soon! If only the rains would break and this oppressive heat be ended! If only her loneliness would cease and Ganesh come back to her!

The day before school reopened her baby came. It was a girl, weak and ailing. The pains had begun in the morning. Ganesh had run out for the doctor, and Videhi went to call Rukmini, who had now returned. A nurse had also come and, of course, the neighbours. The house was crowded out with people. Shalini was shut in her room and poor Ganesh was quite distraught. He had to engage a servant girl to manage the house for the next few days or so. He kept running to the doctor to discover how his wife was. The doctor was rather helpless with women. He felt embarrassed and preferred to leave things to nature. In this case he was lucky, for the labour was normal and the child was born in the afternoon. They noted the time carefully. Shalini did not care for that. She always felt bitterly resentful at that word 'normal'. As if pain itself could ever be normal. She could not tell what she felt. She said to Rukmini afterwards, 'You can find words which will image the most beautiful things, poets do it always. Pain is unspeakable, indescribable. We keep silent about it or, if we do mention it, it is in medical terms that are meaningless, or else in terms of the results, when they are brutal and physical. But pain when it possesses you and

drives in waves through your body, not for once or twice, but repeatedly, and not for a few moments but for hours on end, that is something so black and terrible that there are no words for it. And we women endure it every time a child is born.'

Yet, as she looked at the little one, new-born and crying, she added, 'It is worth while for their love.'

Rukmini, looking at the newly born little girl, was not inclined to agree, so wretched, helpless, crinkled, featureless and characterless it looked. Yet soon it would become a being, a sister to Videhi, a daughter to Shalini, and one day a woman in her own right.

Shalini was physically content. One great crisis was successfully over. Now she could rest and let strength return. Ganesh was far too busy and harassed to feel anything. He had not even time to feel or to express his disappointment that it was a girl. Videhi was delighted. Her wish had come true. She had now a real sister, a real baby that she would be able to nurse, to wash, to dress, to love. She asked Shalini to call the new baby Shubha. Shalini smiled and said perhaps. Her daughter's joy, the only real genuine joy she had seen in welcome to the new child, pleased her. It must be good after all, she thought to herself.

Chapter Five

VIDEHI went to the school for the first time excited both by the new event and the idea of her new sister Shubha. Her father being on the staff of the school gave her, if not a proprietary interest, at least a feeling of belonging in some extra special sense.

Her few lessons with Rukmini helped her also, and she was soon distinguished amongst the other children for quickness and adaptability. There was no serious learning for children so young, but she picked up her letters rapidly. She was happy at school. She wanted to be grown up quickly so that she could mother the new baby properly. At the end of each day's lessons, instead of staying on for the games they organised, she rushed back home to Shalini and the baby. Her mother was still in bed and the servant did most of the household work, but there were many small tasks that Videhi could do, and she was delighted to be able to do them. Life seemed to have opened a second new and golden leaf for her.

Her greatest pride was to be able to hold the baby and nurse it. She loved to watch Shalini wash it and change the napkins and, above all, feed it. Videhi felt that that was the supreme bliss to see Shalini feed her baby at her breast. She would help with the beds at night, and get things for Ganesh, his inks, his pencils, and his books for correction work. Shalini saw the change in Videhi and was pleased that she was so helpful. She only wondered if the child was not losing something through the tasks she did. Ganesh had no doubts at all. He said to Shalini that the girl must learn to help in the house, that it was their duty to train her to become a good Indian wife. He did not now conceal his disappointment that Shubha was a girl and not a boy. In an Indian household, he said, there must be a son. Girls are only an encumbrance to be married off as quickly as possible. Shalini did not argue with him, for she knew how deeply rooted the feeling was, and she felt, too, that he did not seriously mean what he said about girls.

She was still ill. She had recovered from the childbirth, but her old weakness had returned, and she

suffered severe rheumatic pains. The doctor was treating her, but she was impatient for the cure. She wanted to be up in order that they could dismiss the servant and so save money, and so she pretended to be better than she was, and began again to do at least the cooking. For one thing she was weary of Ganesh's continual complaints, which she knew were justified, that the servant girl could not cook properly or to his taste. They kept the servant for the heavier work in the house whilst Shalini did the cooking.

It was not easy for her. When neighbours came, or Rukmini, she was bright and cheerful. Rukmini indeed always cheered her, and she did not need much effort to appear gay in her presence. But by herself she felt as though pain were her shadow from which there was no escape. The treatment she was receiving from the doctor was costly, too costly for them to continue long, nor did it produce any results, and she quietly abandoned it. Ganesh and Videhi thought that it really meant that Shalini was well again and they were both happy. Ganesh did not grumble so much now at the new little baby, he accepted her, but he spoke occasionally to Shalini of the need for a son when she was strong again.

Shalini was perplexed at her pain. If only she were free of it she could do so much in the house and for the children. The new child Shubha was utterly dependent on her, and she felt for it as strong a love as for Videhi. She could not consider within herself any measure of the love she bore the two daughters. Videhi was her first-born, and for five years had received the concentrated care and affection of her mother, and now she was growing up as an individual. Shalini was proud of her and happy and felt a need for her. Shubha needed her absolutely. Meanwhile the pain stayed. Whether she lay in bed or worked in the kitchen it came in its spasms,

and she thought she might as well work as be idle. Perhaps there might be some other cure. She began to read books on homeopathy and to consult a homeopathic doctor. This was cheaper, and the taking of the little pills gave her a feeling of ease. They might do her good; she prayed that they would. At least she could say that she was not neglecting herself. Ganesh, too, approved.

Videhi was amused at the new medicine. She knew her mother was still unwell, and the little round white pills seemed so sweet. She was proud to bring them to her mother at the times they had to be taken.

Shubha had been born at the end of June. It was October now and the cooler months were approaching. The monsoon was over. Ganesh was busy working in the garden digging in order to sow seeds for vegetables. Videhi also had her plot in the garden and planted her seeds. She hoped they would come soon and be nice. Ganesh had his work at school, and almost every evening books to correct, and some little thing in the house to do. He felt himself becoming the complete and perfect family man, according to the Hindu division of life in its four stages. He spoke of this often and praised the Hindu way of life. Shalini listened without much attention, for she felt that behind this talk lay some more intimate and personal application.

Shalini had no quarrel with the Hindu way of life. She knew it was in her blood and in her fate, but her mind was following other channels. She could not justify the physical suffering she herself endured, but she tried to rationalise it away. Suffering was an experience that taught. Only through suffering could one realise the true nature of life. This was part acceptance, part understanding, or all acceptance and all understanding. It is foolish to strive and plan, for that means forcing one's will on other people, interfering with their growth.

One must relax, as it were, and let experience and life flow through one, without judging, without condemning. She recalled the phrases of Indian philosophy that were commonplaces to her, yet soothing commonplaces, the value of detachment, the need to be disinterested. If only all the world could think and feel likewise, and live simply and spontaneously, then what a paradise we humans would have! She wished she had the power to put her thoughts on paper. That would be wrong. I have one object, she thought, to live simply, with detachment. For me to write them down, even if I could, would mean that I was not certain of them, and wanted by convincing others to convince myself, whereas I should want none of these things. I do not. I want only to feel beauty and happiness and accept the pain in silence as part of the price mysterious life asks us to pay.

Ganesh considered himself the model Hindu householder, the father of the family, and desired more than ever a son. Shalini saw no reason to refuse his love or to deny him. If she really believed in the philosophy of detachment she would accept Ganesh's love as she accepted all the rest in the world, and not regard the consequences. If, however, her new ideas were just a veneer to cover the pain in her life, then she knew she was left to her instincts and conventions, and these were Hindu. Ganesh was right in desiring a son. He was right to come to her each night. She was his wife, and a Hindu wife.

Ganesh felt very strongly that his two daughters, Videhi and Shubha, should grow up in a proper Hindu home, with a mother and father to look up to and worship. When there was time in the evenings he would read from a Marathi Ramayan to Videhi. She knew the tales and the story already. Videhi loved the constant

repetition. She would even retell them in her own way to Shubha, though the little one was too young to listen with comprehension; but the sound of Videhi's voice telling about Sita and Hanuman and Lanka often soothed her to sleep. The things we grow up with, thought Shalini, we never tire of.

With Shubha and all the attendant excitements of going to school, Videhi had forgotten her doll and her old games with the stones. One day she came across them and was suddenly reminded of Rajpur and her holiday.

'Do you think we will go away next summer for a holiday?' she asked her mother.

'I don't know,' said Shalini. 'It will be difficult with Shubha. She won't even be one. We'll see.'

'Oh, I don't mind not going,' said Videhi. 'I just wondered. It will be just as nice in Kashi, and by then Shubha may be able to play.'

'She will still only be a baby,' said Shalini, laughing. 'It will be some time before she can play with you. You are quite happy looking after her?'

'Of course,' said Videhi.

'You are her second mother,' said Shalini. 'Shubha is luckier than you. She has both you and I to look after her. You had only me.'

'I had you for such a long time to myself,' said Videhi to her mother and she kissed her.

Towards the end of November Shalini knew that she was going to have another child. She did not tell Ganesh yet, for he would have talked about it, and she did not want Rukmini to know—at least, not just yet. She felt a little ashamed of herself, and then angry with herself for being ashamed. It is my child, she told herself. I have a right to it. No-one would dispute that, but they would wonder at the child coming so soon

after Shubha, especially when everyone knew of Shalini's ill health. Shalini herself felt no fear on that score. She was quite certain that the child would be born safely, and that she would survive it. They would wonder at the drain on her strength. She, too, wondered. She was continuing with the homeopathic treatment, but it seemed to bring no alleviation. The pains came and went, and then she thought perhaps they would not return. But they did. She knew, too, that she was weak. And she was worried about money. The servant they kept was really more than they could afford. Better get rid of the servant, even if it meant more work for herself, and spend what money they might save on food for herself.

She spoke to Ganesh about it.

'Only if you are sure you can manage,' he said, with unwonted consideration, but he did not stop to see if Shalini really could manage.

'We'll do it at once,' said Shalini. 'I'll feel happier with the house entirely to myself. We can get, with the money we save, more food and more milk.'

Then she added:

'We are going to have another child, Ganesh.'

'This time,' he said, 'it will be a boy. You must go to the temple, Shalini, and pray for it.'

Shalini was surprised at this, but she did not mind. She had often as a girl gone to the temple, though she had never taken Videhi, nor had Ganesh wanted Videhi to go.

Shalini did not think of the temple in religious terms. Although Hindu instinct and habit were deeply ingrained in her, she had not thought about religion as an isolated subject. She recalled the temples in Poona to which she had gone with her mother bearing flowers and fruit, and she remembered the black shining god with strings of

pearls around his neck, and the little brass oil lamps, their flickering shadows making the stone carvings of the lives and the loves of the gods strange and grotesque, and the heavy perfume of incense, and the sharper perfume of jasmin, and the dead flowers underfoot, and the deep red kunkum given by the priest. It was a lovely memory. She was happy Ganesh had said that, and she told him she would go and take Videhi also.

Videhi, when she heard that the servant was to go, was angry and upset.

'The other people in the compound have servants,' she said. 'You'll have to do all the work, Shalini. And it's not nice having no servant.'

'We can't help it,' said Shalini, 'so you must not think about it again. And I'm going to the temple and I'll take you. You will like it.'

Videhi would not be appeased. She did not want to lose the servant, and she did not want to go to the temple. She sat in a corner and cried.

Yet in a day or two, when Shalini said they would go, she had forgotten her tears and disappointment. They were to go in the middle of the morning when they thought the temple would be less crowded, although they knew that there were always pilgrims in Kashi, and that the temples were never empty. Shalini put on a white cotton sari, and she tried one on Videhi. Videhi was very proud to wear it. As a child she wore either a thin frock or a skirt and blouse when she had to appear well dressed. They took a tali and put their fruit and flowers on it, and set off in a tonga to the temple. Outside, the temple looked very like an ordinary house with its wooden beams and carvings. It was not very old, perhaps eighteenth century, though no doubt on its site there had always been a shrine. They went in and greeted the god, and their plate of fruit and flowers was

blessed by the priest and tika put on their foreheads. Then they returned. Videhi was surprised that it was over so quickly. She had had no emotions save curiosity, and that had not been much rewarded. Shalini would not admit to herself that the mission had been pointless, though she wondered what it could do for the child within her. She felt, however, that hope also was a prayer, and she hoped desperately and intensely that Ganesh would be satisfied. Perhaps the gods might help. Many strange things did happen.

Kashi, a holy city, was always full of tales of saints and miracles. There were legends of austerity, tales of cures, and for the childless woman children coming, and for those without a son, a son born. It might happen to her. She shivered a little on the way back, for her old pains were returning. Then at home she went on with her day's work. Videhi, who had been given a holiday for the occasion, went to fetch Shubha from a neighbour and then played with her sister. She asked her mother who was in the kitchen:

'Why did we go to the temple, Shalini? You have never taken me before.'

'Surely that is reason enough,' answered Shalini.

'But did you want to go yourself,' persisted Videhi, 'or was it only to take me?'

'Sometimes,' said Shalini, 'we women have to go when we want to ask something.'

'What did you want to ask for?' went on Videhi.

Shalini suddenly felt very shy and very tired. She had not told Videhi yet about the new baby; perhaps now was as good a time as any.

'I am going to have another baby,' said Shalini, 'and we want it to be a brother for you.'

Videhi was surprised.

'Another baby,' she said, 'so soon.'

'No, not so soon,' answered Shalini. 'It will be several months yet.'

'How do you know, Shalini?' asked Videhi, but Shalini would not answer.

'You are too young for that, now look after Shubha, and let me alone to do the cooking.'

Videhi was a little perplexed herself. She had looked forward to Shubha coming with great delight, but the new child seemed an object of indifference and she soon forgot it. She had school and a new routine of activities: more friends, and games, and songs, and the simple lessons. She had home with her few tasks and Shubha to look after and play with. One day was very like another.

Shalini had lost the sense of routine in life. She was anxious about the coming child, and eager for it to be a boy. It will please Ganesh, she thought, if it is a boy, and perhaps complete our family. She was worried also about herself. There was so much work to do and no help. That is not really true, she thought, Videhi helps a lot and so does Ganesh. Still, there is the burden of cooking and cleaning that falls on me. Her health was no better. Sometimes at night the pain was intense. Sometimes for several lucky days she was free from it. The homeopathic treatment did not seem to produce any firm results. One of her neighbours advised her to consult a local guru. He was very good with cures. He had all the knowledge of the past. She asked Ganesh. He agreed.

'There is much wisdom in our own systems of medicine,' he said, 'and it might help you. I think it worth trying.'

So Shalini went to see the old man in his dark house in one of the Kashi lanes. He prescribed various old drugs, formulae that might have been taken from the

Atharva Veda. What does it matter, thought Shalini, where it comes from if only it cures me and frees me from this intolerable pain? I don't care how bizarre it is.

'You must have faith in me,' said the old man, and strangely enough she had.

She felt that out of India's past would come some relief for her pain and herself. She felt that perhaps her pain was a punishment for herself and Ganesh straying out of the paths of Hindu orthodoxy into the so-called modern ways.

She had faith in the past and in the old man, and she found the faith gave her strength, and in many little ways within their household there was a return to orthodox habit and convention. She was still critical, but she accepted the old way of life, the way of life of her mother and of untold generations past. The pain, however, remained, but its presence now seemed a proof of the efficacy of the old ways, for she interpreted it as a punishment.

When the warmer weather came they slept out in the open in the pathway outside their house. Each night before dusk they would carry the beds out and fit the mosquito nets. Each morning before the beds were brought in they swilled the rooms inside with water to cool them. Videhi loved this. She loved to lie in her bed and gaze at the stars through the mosquito net. The night air outside was still cool, and one could hear the neighbours talking. Sometimes a tonga came late into the compound bringing back someone who had been to a cinema, and it was pleasant to be awoken to hear the bells and the horse's hoofs. Outside in the open Videhi had lovely dreams. She liked to wake up early and tell her mother the story of what she dreamed. One night there had been a wedding party going on in a

nearby part of the city, and the music through the night was continuous. In the evening there had been a great procession, for the people concerned were wealthy zemindars. Camels and elephants and horses and servants, some of them carrying guns, went by. And, of course, the litter of the bridegroom going to the bride's house, heavily bedecked with colour. Videhi dreamed of the procession again, and that she herself was the bride. When she awoke in the morning she asked her mother when she would be a bride.

'Who shall I marry, Shalini?' she asked.

'We don't know yet,' said Shalini, laughing.

'I hope it will be someone rich,' said Videhi. 'I don't want to be poor.'

Ganesh got quite angry at this and scolded Videhi.

'You are not to talk like that,' he said. 'You are a Hindu daughter and these things are not your concern.'

The next day Videhi had fever. She complained to Shalini that she had a headache. Shalini came over and felt her and took her temperature.

'You stay in bed,' she said.

She asked Ganesh to call in at the doctor's before he went to school. Both Shalini and Ganesh were busy that morning. They brought Videhi's bed inside. She felt it was nice to lie in bed, but Shalini would not let Shubha come to her. So Videhi lay on one bed and Shubha on the other, the most distant. Then the doctor came. He took her temperature again and looked at her tongue and prescribed a medicine.

'I don't think it will be anything serious,' he told Shalini, and asked her how she herself was. Shalini answered shortly that she was well.

'I hear you are going to have another child,' said the doctor.

'Yes,' said Shalini, and she went on with her work.

Ganesh had promised to come back halfway through morning school to take any prescription the doctor might have left. He came and Shalini had some coffee ready for him.

'He said it was nothing serious,' Shalini told him, 'but you know you can never tell until we see how the fever goes. Here is the prescription. I expect it is the usual one. Please bring it before you go to school.'

'Yes,' said Ganesh, 'I'll do that. I have asked for time off.'

Videhi thought it was fine that her father should take time off to get her medicine. She hoped it would be nice medicine. She called to her mother:

'What do you think the medicine will be like, Shalini?' and as she called she felt her throat sore.

'Now you just rest,' said Shalini, 'until your father comes back, and then you'll see. I've got Shubha to look after as well as you, so you must be good and not trouble me.'

'I'm always good, Shalini,' said Videhi. 'Why do people get ill?'

'We don't always know,' said Shalini, 'but please don't talk now. Let me change Shubha and then feed her.'

'I want to know, Shalini. Tell me, mother,' she said, as the thought struck her when she saw Shubha at Shalini's breast, 'how will you feed Shubha when the new baby comes?'

'You tell me,' answered Shalini, 'how I can feed Shubha now with you talking away there. You are not well. You must rest and not chatter. Just let me finish with Shubha and I'll find a book for you to look at.'

Shalini got Videhi a book, but she did not like reading. It strained her to sit up and look, and lying down was uncomfortable. She let the book fall at the side of her pillow. Ganesh came back with the medicine, pink

stuff, in a bottle. Shalini brought a spoon and a thermometer and took her temperature first. She showed it to Ganesh. It was still high.

'Now, take this,' she said to Videhi.

It was bitter unpleasant stuff. Videhi kept it in her mouth.

'Swallow it quickly,' said Shalini, giving her a pat on the back. Down it went.

'Now, here's a sweet to take away the taste.'

Videhi asked Ganesh if he would read to her.

'Not now,' he said. 'I must go back to school. You rest and be quiet.'

He went away. Shubha was on her bed crowing happily with the food in her. Shalini had gone into the kitchen to cook. Videhi lay back quietly. I'll tell myself a tale, she said to herself.

So day-dreaming she fell asleep, and Shalini was glad to notice her at rest, though she could tell from the touch of her wrist and cheek that the temperature was still high. Fear stayed, for there were always diseases rampant in Kashi—plague, cholera, typhoid, malaria. Perhaps this was just a child's upset and would pass away soon. In the afternoon it was hot, and Shalini joined two beds together so that she could lie down with Shubha and Videhi and get some of the cooling breeze from the fan.

At night Videhi was restless. She had taken the medicine three times now. The temperature was going down, but she complained more of her throat. Shalini had a sudden dread that it might be diphtheria. Next morning the doctor came in again to look at the patient. The temperature was normal, but Videhi still felt sore in the throat. The doctor asked her to open her mouth and held down her tongue with a spoon whilst he swabbed her tonsils.

'You must do that three times a day,' he told Shalini. 'The child will soon be all right.'

Shalini was relieved. Videhi did not like the swabbing any more than the medicine.

'Why can't I have those little pills?' she asked. 'They would be so easy to swallow.'

'This will make you well,' said Shalini. 'You will be quite well in a day or so, and then you can go back to school. I'll let Shubha come to you when she is awake.'

In a day or two Videhi was quite well. The doctor said she could go back to school. Shalini was glad and relieved, and so was Videhi. It had been dull at home in bed. She had been able to day-dream, but she had missed her friends and her teachers and the fixed routine of lessons. The first day back at school was lovely. Everyone asked after her and she felt important. At the end of lessons there were games. Usually, Videhi did not stay for these as she was anxious to get home and be with Shalini and Shubha, but they were only for half an hour, and this time Videhi wanted to stay. Videhi was happy rushing about with the other young girls. Probably she was too excited or just unused to it, for she slipped and fell, and when she tried to get up, laughing, she felt an intolerable burning pain in her neck, and lay down again. They took her into one of the classrooms and the school matron came. She sent for the doctor, but she knew that Videhi had broken her collarbone.

The doctor said she would have to go to hospital to get her neck put in plaster. Shalini came with her, and the ordeal was not long or painful. Videhi came home. She would have to rest in bed for some weeks. Both Shalini and Ganesh were worried and anxious; they feared the extra burden on the cares of the household.

Shalini felt bitterly that it was terribly unfair on her with Shubha to look after and the coming baby, and her own ill health. She worried most about the schooling Videhi would miss.

'She is only a child,' said Ganesh. 'It does not matter at all at her age. Why, she has hardly done one year at school. And she is clever, she will easily pick up what she misses. She is one of the best in the class. Her teachers tell me so.'

'I know,' said Shalini, 'but I am so anxious for her education. I want her to do well. We have no money to offer her. We will have no dowry to give her in marriage. Unless she is clever and works hard, what will happen to her? We must train her for a career.'

'She can be a teacher or a doctor,' said Ganesh. 'Both things are possible, but a slight illness now is not going to interfere with one or the other.'

'You must promise me that, Ganesh,' said Shalini with sudden vehemence.

'Of course,' answered Ganesh. 'You are upset. Your pregnancy is worrying you, but there is nothing really to worry about.'

Nothing to worry about, thought Shalini, with a child ill, a child at my breast, and a child coming, and myself ill. She went back to her work in the house. Shubha was laughing and smiling. Soon she would be saying words. They say the laughter of children costs nothing, yet it is priceless, thought Shalini, priceless except for the tears and the pain of the mother.

One night, she called Ganesh to get the doctor. He understood at once and went off. He was back soon and took his own bed inside the house and fixed up the mosquito net and the fan. Shalini went inside. Even with the fan it was intensely hot. The doctor came and saw Shalini and said he would send for

a nurse. A neighbour came. The pains began, and Shalini knew that she would be reduced again to mere suffering flesh. In the intervals she asked for water and hoped the dawn would bring the birth and relief. Neighbours came in to comfort her and talk. She hardly noticed their coming and going. Throughout the night the intermittent agony went on, and dawn came, and no child.

‘It will be born later,’ said Shalini. ‘A son in the full strength of the sunlight. Like Arjuna he shall shoot arrows.’

She did not know what she was saying. She suddenly thought of Videhi and Shubha. Ganesh will deal with them. And she gave them no more thought. The daylight of early morning was too intense and she asked for the curtains to be drawn. Rukmini came in, but she hardly remembered her visit, though her mind was clear enough.

‘There’s nothing you can do now,’ she said. ‘It only rests with me. The mother comes into her own, and all the world must wait on her.’

Then the pains came again in increasing spasms. She fought with blackness and with fire and wished for death.

Ganesh was looking after the children. He was worried and flustered. He felt the husband’s part so insignificant and wanted to do more. Given tasks, he was occupied and useful. All the people who came in spoke to him. They were all certain it would be a son, and Ganesh himself was quite confident.

‘If only it would end soon,’ he kept on saying. ‘This suffering is so pointless.’

Videhi had Shubha to look after, but she was worried also. She knew her mother was in great pain. She could not think why babies were so difficult, and she

shook Shubha to scold her for the pain she, in her time, had caused Shalini. It was midday now and very hot, and they had the long afternoon to get through. For Shalini there was a lull and she dropped off to sleep, too weary to eat what the neighbours had brought to strengthen her. Ganesh sent to borrow a second fan so that Videhi and Shubha could be cool. He fixed it up and wondered what to do. Shalini was still sleeping. One of the neighbours was with her. The nurse was in the kitchen eating. The house was quiet and still.

‘Read to us, please,’ said Videhi.

He took down the *Ramayan* and sat at the side of Videhi’s bed, whilst Shubha lay on Videhi’s pillow, and the fan breeze played on them all. He read the part at the end, in some editions apocryphal, how when Rama had won Sita back from Lanka and had defeated Ravana, the people murmured against Sita. She, who had been Rama’s wife, had spent so long in Lanka, and whose word had they for what had occurred between her and Ravana? Sita, they said, was not a good wife. She had not been true to Rama. And Rama, the great king, with the people’s welfare ever at his heart, listened to these rumours, for they grew daily louder. One day they reached the ears of Sita, the incomparable, the perfect, the devoted wife. For the first time in her life, shame rushed through her blood and filled her being.

‘Build a pyre,’ she told the king, ‘and place me on it, light it and let me die. So will I prove to the people my love for Rama.’

And Rama agreed and the pyre was built. When it was ready Sita came out of her palace, rich with all the splendid jewels of the first and greatest of India’s kings. Slowly she walked to the pyre, and at its foot began, one by one, to throw off her jewels, saying:

‘These are not mine. They are Rama’s. But my heart is mine and that is pure, and though it also belongs utterly to Rama, yet will I give it to the gods to show him that it is pure and the people’s talk false.’

She ascended the pyre and it was lit.

Ganesh heard a cry and stopped reading. He went to see Shalini. She was awake now, trembling at the onset of fresh pains. The nurse came rushing in and pushed Ganesh out.

‘It won’t be long now,’ she said.

And so they waited in silence. But it was long, and Ganesh grew restless. Videhi said to him:

‘You did not tell us what happened to Sita.’

He only answered that he was going to make some tea. It was hotter and closer now than ever. Shalini felt very weak. She had but one thought, and that was that she would die. Death so near did not seem so terrible. It would be a release. When the nurse brought in the tea Ganesh had made, she asked for the children to be sent in. Ganesh carried Shubha and Videhi hobbled in. She could walk fairly easily, but she felt awkward with her stiff neck. She touched her mother’s hand and Shalini smiled at her. What could she say to the child? She held out her hand for Shubha and fondled the little one’s fat face.

‘Be a good girl,’ she said to Videhi. ‘Be like Sita.’

Then suddenly she called to the nurse, ‘Take them away.’

Videhi was hurt and mystified.

‘Is not the baby born yet?’ she asked Ganesh.

‘We must be patient,’ said Ganesh. ‘There’s nothing else we can do.’

Dusk came and then the evening. People kept dropping in to ask how Shalini was. Ganesh could say so little. He was dreadfully tired himself, though he

felt it unfair to feel tired. Still, he would welcome the night. He tried not to think of Shalini. The pains kept coming and in the intervals all she could say was that she was going to die. Ganesh refused to contemplate that. The doctor had been several times, but there was only one thing, to wait on the pains to cease. Ganesh said to himself, I must be sensible. I must not think of the suffering. What I can help in I'll do, but patience is the only thing. I'll think of my son. He must not be a teacher like myself, there's no money in teaching, and for all the fine words they say about it, no honour; it is a despised profession. He'll be an engineer and build bridges over India's great rivers. He'll travel from north to south, and from east to west, and be famous. Perhaps he'll be a doctor and a great surgeon. That would be fitting if he could devote his life to the relief of pain and win renown that way. Better still, he'll be a great leader for our people and take them on the road to freedom, for then he'll have power and influence on the lives of all as well as fame. India will surely be free when he is a man. So Ganesh occupied himself through the long night spinning the stories of his son's future fame in many forms and at great length. Every now and then he would go to see Shalini, but there was no change. Either she was sleeping or resting with a deathly pallor on her face, or she was torn and twisted in paroxysms of pain.

Dawn came and with it a new note, the cry of a child. Ganesh went quickly to find out.

'It is a girl,' said the nurse, 'and Shalini will be all right soon.'

Ganesh thought, all that agony for a girl. Three daughters and no son. He was terribly angry. He went into the kitchen to make tea. Videhi had got up. She came to him and asked how Shalini was.

'You have another sister,' said her father.

Videhi could see that he was dark with anger and displeasure.

‘May I go to Shalini?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said her father.

Videhi went to her mother and saw the new baby.

‘What shall we call her, Shalini?’ But Shalini was too tired to answer.

‘Why is Ganesh so angry?’ she went on. But, again, Shalini did not answer.

‘Come back later,’ said the nurse. ‘Let your mother rest now. Besides, we have to clean up the place. You go and look after Shubha.’

Videhi went out. It seemed no-one wanted the new baby. Shubha was awake now. At least here was one who would be glad of a sister; they’ll be so close together, thought Videhi.

She had two sisters now. They were going to call her new one Vasanti. Shubha could crawl about and was beginning to speak. Videhi was fully occupied with her, and then, as before, she could also help her mother with Vasanti. It was lucky in one way that Vasanti had come in the school holidays, for Ganesh was at home all the day and could help about the house. Shalini recovered quickly, and she felt also that she was free of all her old pains. She did the cooking, and Ganesh did the heavy work, moving the beds in and out each day, and he went out to do the shopping. He liked doing this, to find the best vegetables at the cheapest rate, and he prided himself on his bargaining skill. Shalini told Videhi that she must do some school work whilst on holiday to make up for what she had lost whilst she was ill and absent.

‘We learn hardly anything at school, Shalini,’ said Videhi. ‘I won’t be a bit behind when I go back when school reopens.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Shalini, ‘but you must learn a

little now. You've got to study. You must be clever and get on. We want you to do well.'

'Why?' asked Videhi.

'You are too young to understand yet,' said Shalini, 'but you know we are not rich. Your father has to bring up three daughters now. We want you to work hard at school so that you can study further and earn your own living. Would not you like to do that?'

'I'd like to be a nurse,' said Videhi, 'looking after children. Best of all, I'd like to be a mother.'

'Well, even mothers have to learn, so you do your work. Just a little each day. Ganesh will give you some English words to copy and some sums.'

'I know English already. I can talk to Rukmini quite easily,' said Videhi.

'Yes, but reading and writing are different from talking. You must learn these too, and do sums.'

So Videhi had her homework to do throughout the holidays. It was not much, but it was tiresome, and she hated the sums and often got them wrong.

This made Ganesh angry. Although, and perhaps because, he was a schoolteacher, he had no patience with slow learners and was sarcastic at their mistakes, saying girls could never learn, that one did not expect intelligence from women. He said this kind of thing to Videhi, and with greater bitterness in his tone because he resented so much the three daughters. Once he even struck her with his hand. Shalini saw it and got immediately white-hot angry with a tense new strength from her willpower. Videhi was astonished, ashamed and hurt at the blow, but she quite forgot it and her own feelings at the exhibition of her mother's temper and will. Ganesh, too, was caught surprised. He regretted the slap, but all his feelings faded away before the heat of Shalini's anger. He had no strength like that and just

wilted. It had been a careless foolish gesture on his part and he let the matter drop.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I forgot myself.'

He did not strike Videhi again, nor did he wish to.

Videhi did not forget. He still spoke sarcastically, even when there were visitors in the house, about his daughters. It was an outlet for expressing a deeper dissatisfaction, almost a sense of estrangement from Shalini. Nor did she forget her mother's sudden outburst of temper. She noticed her mother getting difficult in other ways. When school began again and both Ganesh and Videhi were away for nearly the whole day, Shalini had to have some help in the house. She needed a servant. She could not manage the two young children and the housework and the cooking, for though the old illness had not returned, she was still weak and any heavy work exhausted her. She could not carry in the beds or fetch buckets of water to swill and clean the floors. They were not rich enough to pay much for a servant, so only the poorest old women came.

With the slight chill of winter in December, Shalini's illness returned. She thought she had escaped it. She went again to her guru and took his medicines and his faith. For a time the illness kept her bedridden, and then there was peace in the house. The servant was left alone and somehow she managed. Shalini used to worry at the dreadful state her kitchen must be in, but there was nothing she could do, so she closed her eyes and thought. Her physical weakness and her suffering had strengthened her will and she was more determined and resolute. She told Ganesh that, however much he wanted a son, he would have to wait at least for a year until Vasanti could walk. She was surprised at the ease with which she said it, and she was surprised at Ganesh's comparatively quiet acceptance.

‘Until you are strong,’ he said, ‘I would not dream of it.’

Though she had achieved a certain physical freedom, she could not remove the continuous tension in the household. As she lay in pain on her bed it was not about this that she thought. She was thinking of the future, of what Videhi, Shubha and Vasanti would come to. She looked upon herself as ended, worn out, and wanted anything but her own fate for her children.

Her own life as a girl and a young woman had been happy. Her father was not rich but he had money to educate his children and to send them to school and college. It was at college that she had met Ganesh and fallen in love with him, and then married him. She had been full once of ideas for herself and then for Ganesh, for she had admired as well as loved him. Now she abandoned herself and Ganesh as old people tired out by life. Only of her children did she think, and how to ensure their happiness and their prosperity, especially for Videhi. If only she could achieve it for Videhi the rest would follow easily. She would pray to the gods for help. She believed in them. All the childhood tales took on a new and deeper meaning for her. When her children were married and settled, she promised herself, she would go on a pilgrimage, first to the temples of the south and then back to Kashi. She did not mind the pain they sent her if only they granted her this. Nor did she care any more about future children. Let Ganesh love her if he wished. The passion of love gave her no pleasure. It was as though life had so schooled her that she could experience only pain. That was untrue. Vasanti at her breast and fondling her thrilled her and pleased her, and what was that but a pleasurable sensation? She was happy the child could be so simply pleased. She would be happy if Ganesh could be pleased in his turn.

Chapter Six

SOME things Videhi learnt quickly, but at others she was backward. She did not care about the figures and made no effort to learn the rules or the tables. She did not care much about Hindi either. It was only in English that she was outstandingly good. Her teachers were worried about her, particularly as she was the daughter of a member of the staff. At the end of the second year in April they said she was not good enough for promotion but must stay next year in the same form. Ganesh was disappointed, but all he said was, 'What can one expect from girls?' Shalini said nothing harsh, though she, too, was upset.

'I'll teach you,' she said, 'and you will find it easy.'

So began her third school holidays. Shubha was two now and Vasanti one. They made a happy family group. Shubha was fat and chubby and very placid in temperament. Vasanti was an ailing child. Videhi was a thin seven-year-old girl, but people said she would be beautiful when she grew up, like her mother.

'More beautiful than that,' said Shalini.

Videhi was unhappy for a day or so at the idea of being kept back for a further year at school in her old class, but with the holidays she soon forgot it.

In the early mornings Videhi would come over to Rukmini's rooms with Shubha and Vasanti, and they all played on the cool veranda. It was quite like old times when she had had no sisters, only better. Rukmini promised to take her to the cinema. Videhi had not been often, partly because the usual Marathi or Hindi film

shown was not very good, and partly because neither Shalini nor Ganesh were ever free from their family in the evenings to take her, and of course there was always the expense, however modest, to consider. A visit to the cinema was a great outing for Videhi and she looked forward to it with joy.

The story was based upon the love of a young student from a respectable family for a stray outcast girl found wandering in the streets of Bombay and given shelter by the young man's sister, who was also involved in a romance. Should the young man marry this unknown poor girl and outrage all the feelings and conventions of his family and circle of friends? Should the young girl, his sister, be permitted to indulge in her romance and marry the young man she loved, he, however, being rich and respectable? The issue in her case was the rightness or otherwise of a young girl being allowed to fall in love and to choose her husband. There were interludes of various kinds in the story, but the issues were resolved quite simply. When the outcast girl realised the turmoil she was causing she committed suicide, and her end made both the parents more tolerant, and they permitted the marriage of their daughter.

Videhi was entranced with the film. The meaning, serious or otherwise, did not touch her. She just enjoyed the story and she was deeply impressed with two shots. One showed the girl, Dhulari, wandering at dawn in a rain-swept Bombay street with bits of garbage on the road and a dog in the gutter; and on her face, when they gave the close-up, an expression of utter weariness and dejection and homelessness. The other was towards the end of the film when Dhulari walked to the railway lines, for she was to throw herself under a train. The lines were gleaming wet and Dhulari was going to them very slowly, and in the distance could be heard the rush

and roar of the approaching train, but on her face was joy, transfiguration, a happiness unbelievable.

It was late when they returned home and Videhi went at once to bed, but next morning she told Shalini all about the film. She was an able storyteller and Shalini was pleased at her skill in description. She felt sure, whatever people at school might say, that Videhi had resources of ability, and she felt more determined than ever that they should be developed, and that Videhi should achieve freedom and the opportunity of such development.

Videhi went back to school quite happy in her old class. At the end of each winter term the school had its annual celebration. Plays were performed, some distinguished visitor invited, the parents came, and the local officials from the government in Kashi. Videhi was chosen to take part and she was delighted. The rehearsals were a continuous joy to her and she entered into them with great zest. She insisted that Shalini should make her dress, whatever it cost, and Shalini did not grudge cutting up one of her few richer embroidered skirts for the occasion. Ganesh, too, was busy with the celebrations, and for about six weeks before the final day all the school life revolved around this one centre.

The day came. The programme included one very short play in Hindi, one play in English, and some dances by the senior girls and then speeches. Videhi was in the Hindi play. It was a version of the life of Mira Bai, one of the most popular themes in schools. Mira Bai was taken by one of the senior girls who could also sing well. Videhi was an attendant who had only to appear for a short while and say a few words of announcement. This was at the beginning. Once her part was over she could slip out and join her mother in the audience, proud of having done it without fault.

Shalini praised her when she came and then they both looked at the stage. It was beautifully decorated and for wings they had hung rich Madrassi silk saris. The scene was indeed regal. The King of Merwar was on his throne and Mira Bai came in from the other wing, slowly, stately, a slender girl in a simple light green thin sari with the palla tightly fixed. She wore the ornaments of royalty and pleaded with the king, who was her husband, that she had no other lover but her god. He would not listen and went off the stage in a pompous outraged kingly fashion, unbelieving and contemptuous of the woman before him. Then, alone, Mira Bai sang one of the famous passionate, devotional songs in praise of her only lover, her god. It was as well known to the audience as the stories of Sita, but they thrilled to its passion and lilt. Shalini was moved and Videhi overcome. How sweet the name of Mira Bai sounded, and how good it would be if only one could be like her! The audience were enthusiastic in their applause.

The English play was a curious contrast. But they had so many limitations to combat. It would have been improper and unpleasing for the girls to dress as English men or women. So, for their English play, they had each year to seek out one with an oriental background where dress and style were not an obstacle. They had chosen some scenes from Flecker's *Hassan*. The poetry seemed enhanced by the thin shrillness of the girls' voices, and their slower more deliberate enunciation of a foreign speech suited the mood of the play admirably. Even to Shalini the final version came as an unexpected delight. It was *Hassan*; it was *Yasmin*. Their thin voices crying through the night Flecker's lovely lines on the choice between pain and love, between death and love, between the horror of black forgetfulness, the annihilation of love, and the endurance of love in pain.

Videhi sensed the poet's truth and she clung tightly to Shalini's hand, and Shalini knew that she understood the unutterable sacrifices life has to make if love is to endure at its first passionate intensity of ecstasy. In that sacrifice time is lost, though time returns with all the heavy weight of the empty years to underline the loss. The instance of experience is enough, and the demand that it be continued through normal life unreasonable, and never met. Even those, thought Shalini, who, like Mira Bai, pour out all their love on god are caught up soon enough by the bitterness of time and finished.

She sighed. She hoped the play would not excite Videhi too much. Soon the day would be over, for only the speeches remained. They were listening now to the Principal giving the usual account of the year's activities, and the ideals behind the school, and how important it was for India that more and more women should be educated. Videhi was getting restless, and Shalini felt a tedium. She had left Shubha and Vasanti behind with a servant; she hoped they were all right. If the speeches took much longer she would slip away. Perhaps Videhi wanted to go to the bathroom. She whispered in Marathi. Videhi shook her head.

In the noise of the final applause Shalini slipped away, taking Videhi with her. Videhi was quiet. Ganesh came in later and began talking about the show. One of the girls had forgotten her lines. He said the prompter was too loud, and he was annoyed that the Principal had not said anything about the teaching of Marathi in the school.

'We do teach Marathi, and it is very important. It is one of the most vital of modern Indian languages. More people may speak Hindi, but Marathi has a better literature.'

He went on to the speech by the visitor.

‘It was very good, but too short. Surely she could have spared us more time.’

‘A short speech sticks,’ said Shalini.

‘Yes, it was good,’ said Ganesh, ‘but it would have been more fitting if it had been longer.’

‘If it had been longer,’ said Shalini, ‘she might have explained what she meant by freedom for women. Then you might not have liked it.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Ganesh. ‘She was talking about freedom for India.’

‘I know,’ said Shalini. ‘You would not like women to be free. It would make the world so unsafe for you. You need not worry. A woman very quickly finds her chains.’

She went off to cook the evening meal.

Videhi listened to all this. She wondered why so lovely a day should end on a jarring note, but before she had been wondering long Shubha and Vasanti came to her and wanted to know all about the plays and what Videhi herself had done.

Videhi had done well at school that year and knew she would be promoted. She was learning easily now and was considerably in advance of her class, not only in outlook, for people had always remarked upon her precocity, but in learning. Shalini had become pregnant again. Neither she nor Ganesh thought much about it. Secretly he feared lest overmuch thinking might rob him of his desire, and he affected an indifference to the issue.

‘It is sure to be a girl,’ he said, and left it at that.

Shalini did not think because she was too busy. For some time now she had been feeling better and had been free from her old pains. She hoped it would continue like this.

The baby was expected towards the end of November. Shalini was grateful for this, for the time would be

comparatively cool, and it would be easier for her to manage. She had stopped thinking. Only she was still insistent that Videhi should work hard at school. In her own behaviour she was more orthodox, and kept all the fast days. She went to the temple again. She was kind to her children but less affectionate and Videhi felt her mother was growing harder. Towards Ganesh she combined a casualness and a submissiveness that made him very angry. She was the orthodox wife, but she did not care about his feelings, and refused to pander to his whims by flattering his vanity. Physical submission she gave blindly, but to Ganesh it seemed as though she despised him in the giving. He became more cynical and he grew prouder of his cynical remarks. Videhi did not like them. Nor did she like her mother's indifference. Why was it, she thought, that poets wrote about love so nobly when around one was all this misunderstanding? She asked her mother.

'You love what you have made,' said Shalini, 'so it is easy to love your children, however ugly or ill or naughty they may be—and you love what you dream about, but there is no way of learning to dream rightly, except by dreaming wrongly—and you love what you think worthy of your love, but when you discover it is unworthy then you stop. Despite yourself, you stop.'

'Why don't you love Father any more?' asked Videhi.

Shalini was so surprised she did not know what to answer.

'You must not say or think that,' she said. 'Of course I love Ganesh. You are only a child.'

Videhi said nothing.

The baby was a girl. Ganesh felt sick and angry. Shalini had suffered greatly again. After it was over she remembered her first pains and how she thought that suffering taught. If she had only been stronger she

would have laughed. Pain, she told herself, is just pain. It does not teach. It does not refine. It takes all the soft loveliness and leaves only the hard rind. Pain is the traitor and the enemy. What was the use of thinking like that? She must get well quickly and look after the children, four girls now. She asked Videhi what they should call the new sister.

‘Call her Sakuntala,’ said Videhi. ‘It is a lovely name and a lovely story, and though Sakuntala was tried hardly, it all came out well in the end.’

Shalini thought this might be an omen and she was pleased at Videhi’s idea.

‘We will call her Sakuntala, and all will come out well in the end,’ she said, ‘if we do not offend the gods or holy men.’

Chapter Seven

THE YOUNG children, Shubha and Vasanti, at the end of each day would come to the gate to wait for Videhi. At home she would play with them. They loved it and she liked it. She was very fond of school. She liked home, too, but it was rather cramped now, and in the cooler weather they spread out their bedding on the floor and did not use the beds, except for Shalini and Ganesh. In the hot weather they had to have the beds outside, but they left them leaning against the house wall during the day. Inside it was rather like a caravanseraï, or as Ganesh used to say in his half-mocking tone meant to please and to hurt, ‘My house is all zenana.’ Videhi thought it was nice to have the beds on the floor, though it was difficult to fix the mosquito nets.

With the coming of the hot months the mangoes ripened. The children loved them. Ganesh was an expert on mangoes, and knew all the kinds grown in Bombay and Poona. There were none better than those in Poona, he said. Videhi believed him, but she liked those grown in Kashi all the same. Outside Kashi there were many fields of mango trees, and most compounds had several trees. The children ate them sensibly by biting the nipple of the mango and sucking out all its sweetness and then discarding the skin, until only the large bare stone was left. Adults were more circumspect and cut the fruit with a knife, although the steel edge robbed it of some of its sweetness. The children liked to draw and paint mangoes, there were so many shades of green and orange and yellow, and the shape was easy. Videhi liked to draw the tree, large and shapely, full of greenery and richness. It was the most wonderful of trees. The palms were good in their straightness, but they shot away from the earth as if in contempt, and often enough at their crown was a vulture's nest, or at least the great loathsome birds settled on it. The banana was ugly and stumpy. Its leaves were useful. Often they used the fresh cut leaves at meals when they had guests and not enough talis to go round. But the tree was uncouth, and the banana flower, large, dull red, and leathery in texture, was almost obscene.

Shalini was more than curious about Videhi's character and future and had had her horoscope read. It was a tantalising horoscope and said that Videhi would have a brother, that she would marry and be rich, and that her parents would never be poorer. Shalini would have liked to have a more detailed analysis made, but that would have cost more money than she or Ganesh were willing to spare. There were so many people in

Kashi who foretold the future and read horoscopes, and indeed there was a deep faith in them which Shalini herself shared. The knowledge is there, she said, only sometimes it is misinterpreted. There were extraordinary tales current in Kashi, that city of wonders. She liked to hear them, and Videhi enjoyed them too.

There was a man who lived in one of the old dark houses in a gully off the crowded shopping centre of Chowk, whose house was a house of mystery, dark, silent, lonely. In its rooms were stored hundreds of thin dry bundles of palm leaves, and on these, written in clear-cut Sanskrit characters, were the lives of all who had been or would be. People swore it was true. Only give him sufficient information to identify you and he would pull out the leaf of your life and tell you your story. There were the tales of people who had remembered their former births, and gone back to their old villages and claimed knowledge of the people there. Tales such as these were one of the continuous threads of conversation in Kashi, and Shalini knew them and Videhi heard them. They both believed and accepted it as a commonplace, neither regarding the tale in itself as miraculous, nor their own belief as anything extraordinary or dissonant with the rest of their lives.

Videhi was not permitted to go outside the compound by herself. She could go in the company of other girls, provided it was to a known destination, or if she was with an adult or a servant. She did not feel this as a restriction, it was part of the local, the national convention and never troubled her. She was glad when in the cool of the evening she was able to go with Rukmini or someone else taking the little children with her for a brief walk. Sometimes they went along the main road past a small whitewashed Christian church. It was bare and empty. Videhi wondered why people ever went

there. Near it and attached to it was a mission school for girls. These were usually abandoned babies found in the streets of Kashi, and they were taught Urdu, needle-work, and some domestic craft. Videhi had been over it once with Rukmini, for Rukmini had been curious to see the work done there and had hoped to get a clean honest servant out of the mission. They had not been impressed. The mission was very poor, and the school as bare as any village school. Videhi felt sure they beat the-girls, and was glad she was going to a good school where there was so much richness. She felt no sympathy with the mission or its inmates. They probably deserved beating.

Home had not changed. With Shubha and Vasanti and now Sakuntala able to walk she had more tasks. These she welcomed, for she not only liked helping her sisters, but she saw how tired her mother was, and how often ill. Shalini was never really well, but she carried on, ignoring her weakness. The house and the family exhausted her, but to that exhaustion she had become utterly accustomed. When the pain returned she would lie down, silently waiting for it to diminish sufficiently so that she could get back to work—the ceaseless round of cooking and cleaning, and the care of the children with their continuous succession of minor ailments. She had forgotten herself as a woman and cared no more for beauty or dress. She had never been vain, but she had been proud. Now pain had taken away her pride and left only a hard unconquerable will to endure. Her nature had always been a simple one and she had been quick in her youth and in her happier past to see the beauty in simple things. Now, if she saw it, it was with an indifferent eye—let it be for others, let it be for Videhi, for my children, but no more for me.

Her comfort was no longer the perception of loveliness

and grace and delicacy, but a deep unreasoning faith in the gods, in the old legends, in the old stories, in mantras and charms, for these alone seemed to justify the present. She had asked the guru to give her a charm for a son and he had done so. She told Ganesh that this was certain. Ganesh accepted her faith, but he did not praise it. He had lost the capacity to praise. Life is as hard for me as it is for Shalini, he thought, but she has no sympathy. 'She no longer treats me as a person. She has become more orthodox and dutiful in the old Hindu sense, but more remote. I am the husband to whom she is bound, but the bonds are accepted with passivity and indifference. If only there were some willingness! He had not himself Shalini's faith in the charm. He could not believe that she would ever bear him a son. The gods were going to deny him that gift. When Shalini told him that she was pregnant again he smiled and said, 'Another daughter, another flower in my garden.' He thought no more about it. He was certain it would be a daughter. The child was expected in the summer. Videhi did not know what to think herself. She felt that with her three sisters they were a happy group. They were getting on well together. She was eleven now and Shubha was nearly seven, Vasanti six and Sakuntala four. There seemed no room in their group for any more.

She asked Shalini, 'But do we really need another baby?' and knew that she should not have asked it. Shalini did not reply at once, and then she said, 'Your father wants a son. I am going to give him a son. Now my time has come.'

Videhi felt uncertain. She asked her father if it would be a son, and he answered, 'How can your mother bear anything but daughters?'

Videhi was old enough now to be hurt at such a reply, and asked no more questions. She was old enough to

feel that there was something missing in the love between her mother and father. She blamed neither. She only wished they were as happy as she and her sisters were happy together.

Shalini had a bad time bearing the child. Videhi recalled the births of her sisters and remembered the upset in the house and the pain. All the pain comes to Shalini, she thought, and she felt afraid. The child was a boy. Ganesh was astonished. At last his wish had been granted and he was not sure that his wish now was so strong as it had been before. Still it had come, a son to him. The pride of fatherhood for the first time fell upon him. He would have to celebrate the event with a party to his friends and neighbours. He would wait till Shalini was recovered. Now he was all joyful, and Shalini was pleased at his joy. He wanted to talk over with her the name of the boy; she said she was tired and must rest.

‘Tomorrow will be time enough. Meanwhile, you ask Videhi.’

Ganesh went to Videhi. He was so happy he forgot she was but a girl and treated her as an equal, as an adult. Videhi was pleased. She said, ‘It must be a name you choose, Father.’

Ganesh ran through the famous names, Rama, Arjuna, Krishna, Bhima, and the Maratha names, Shivaji, Sayaji, and names like Arun and Kumar.

‘Which do you like?’ he asked Videhi.

‘They are all nice,’ she said, ‘but they stand for different things, and some of them have been used so often. Rama was a great king, but I think he was unkind to Sita. He loved her, but only as a queen. If we call him Arjuna he may be rash and quick-tempered. He will please eagerly and rapidly, but I do not think he will have any endurance of affection. And Krishna, he

loved so many, we would not want ours to be like that. Bhima was dull and a warrior. I do not remember anything about him that would please a woman. With men like Shivaji and Sayaji, although they are our own heroes we do not know that they were happy or brought happiness to those around them. I would like a name like Arun or Kumar, which is kind and gentle. But I am sure,' she added, 'you and Shalini know more about names than I do.'

Ganesh told Shalini all that Videhi had said.

'She is growing up rapidly,' said Shalini. 'She is no longer a child. She is nearly twelve.'

In the end the boy was called Vishnu. Ganesh had his party. It was as though a new lease of life had been given to him. He felt younger and stronger. The neighbours all congratulated Shalini, and she, too, was happy in that she had fulfilled her function. Everybody was pleased with the birth of the boy. Videhi's sisters were delighted.

'Now we will have a brother of our own to play with,' they cried.

But Videhi herself wondered at it all. She was glad, glad that the birth was over and that Shalini and Ganesh for once were, so pleased. She was glad, too, for little Vishnu, but there was a great difference in their ages and he would still be a child whilst she was a woman. She wondered, too, at the general acceptance of everyone that the boy was so much better than the girl, so much the more welcome. What did it really matter whether one was a boy or a girl? Why should so much value be given to the one and denied to the other? For the first time one aspect of the curious inequality of the sexes struck her and it did not seem to make sense. She knew that what Ganesh and the neighbours felt was the general feeling, deep-rooted and widespread, going far back

into India's past. Now it struck her almost personally and she was perplexed.

Her mind was developing rapidly. At school she was a careful and conscientious student who worked hard, partly because she liked the work and partly because she knew the necessity for it. She was a popular and able girl and each year took part in the school functions. One of the things that she missed, however, was the dancing. The school taught dancing in one of the classical Indian styles, but it was an extra subject and cost additional money which she knew her parents just could not afford.

Every year in their celebrations at school there was an item of dancing and it was beautifully done. The exhibition was confined to the senior girls about sixteen or seventeen years old, and though the style of dancing followed that favoured by the dancing master, the actual dance was an original composition designed by him. Everything heightened the effect—the stage, rich in artistically chosen silks, the saris of the girls, the music, the movements, and, above all, the young girls themselves. To Videhi it was a delight to behold and a wonder to envy. It seemed finer than any poetry; it was for her the most beautiful thing in the world, and though she could not train for it, now at least she could watch and enjoy it. She had asked Shalini once if she could learn to dance and Shalini had said that they could not afford it.

‘It is a luxury, and, besides, a waste. Once these girls are married they will never dance again.’

Videhi thought it wrong to call it waste and sad that it might be, and then she said, ‘What does it matter? At least once they have danced and been beautiful. They will never forget it.’

Shalini realised that circumstances were forcing an early maturity upon Videhi and half regretted that she had known so little of the careless gaiety of childhood.

She saw Videhi growing increasingly quiet and reserved and serious. Probably it is only womanhood coming to her, and besides, it will give her strength. She was glad of Videhi's progress at school. Her sisters were happy, too, but they were playful, mischievous, full of giggles, less conscious of their home, less conscious of poverty. They grew up amidst it, whereas, with Videhi, she had seen with each coming child greater hardships thrust upon the family, and she alone of the sisters had had the extra burdens of responsibility and been the conscious witness of the prolonged physical suffering of her mother.

Yet Videhi was happy. She was content at home and helped in the care of Vishnu, as she had helped with all her sisters as babies. Practice had made her expert, and inclination to help Shalini led her naturally to it. At school, too, she was happy. The teachers were kind and competent, but none of them had won her love. She still felt that her one friend was Rukmini, though Rukmini had left Kashi now, and her letters to Shalini with a postscript for Videhi were very rare.

At school one day was very much like another and there seemed little difference between the terms. It was as though she had always been going to school and always would go. Dimly she knew it would come to an end, but she could not foresee it or imagine her life after school. More important at this stage than the future were the things that occupied her, her subjects, for these loomed so large in the school's values, and she naturally, with the other children, accepted them. They often talked about what they liked and what they hated and what bored them. She loved reading English novels. She was equally ready in writing. The school exacted a weekly essay and Videhi wrote always happily whatever the subject. History and geography she also liked.

Her imagination was fired with the splendours of

Mogul India and its magnificent emperors and great palaces. She wanted to see Agra and old Delhi. The ancient past, Vedic times and Buddhist India appealed to her. She knew Sarnath quite well and felt an intense admiration for the Lord Buddha, Sakyamuni Gautama, though she wondered why he, too, turned his face against women and left his wife and child for a mission. The themes of such a sacrifice were a commonplace in school exercises. Videhi saw the event vividly and personally. She saw the young Buddha leaving the palace room with his wife and child sleeping; and she saw the young wife wake up and cry with heartrending bitterness at the departure. What did it matter if, later in the story, the young wife, too, became a convert to Buddhism? The pain had been inflicted and Videhi saw it as sharp and intolerable, an evil not to be erased by any after-deeds, something for which all the later fame and glory of Buddha could not atone.

She was showing herself a serious child with a rich and fertile mind, with an unusual depth of feeling. Shalini was aware of this and wondered what Videhi thought of her home, of herself and Ganesh. She was quiet and obedient and docile, all, in fact, that a good Hindu daughter should be. She was loyal and loved her sisters dearly, and Shalini knew that the bond between herself and Videhi was one of affection and love, both deep. She wondered, however, whether the child would some day sit in judgement upon her, and she trembled at what the judgement might be.

She looked at herself in the mirror and saw a worn face, and then she blushed, for it was so long since she had thought of herself physically.

'What have I to do with beauty and attractiveness, the mother of five children? All that is finished,' she told herself.

She dressed plainly in white cotton saris. Her hair was thinning and greying. She felt sad at that. She realised how little she had done for Ganesh in the last years.

I have become everything he wanted, the obedient Hindu wife. I have accepted uncomplainingly the conditions of life with him. I have borne him a son. Surely all that is enough? It is what has been taught to us by our mothers and grandmothers. It is written in our books. It is in our songs and poems. The devotion of the Hindu wife is the greater strength of our people, our reason for surviving. Time after time in the past the foreign flood of men and arms and ideas have swept over India. They have hurt and damaged, but Hinduism remains still, and it is because of us that it remains. We have one faith, one loyalty, one devotion. We need no other crown or ornament.

So Shalini consoled herself in thoughts. She continued half-talking to herself.

I could have been an individual, but pain killed me. I thought then that only I was paying the price, but Ganesh, too, has lost. If only our children have not lost. I would not hurt them, but fate has its own will, and who can say that they are safe from its toils? There is nothing more that I can do except pray to the gods and carry on. Others have endured. Others have suffered. Pain is our oldest companion, love the first of our toys to be broken. But the gods survive, and in their belief is strength. Let the time pass and the children be settled and I will pray for their happiness in every temple in India.

She had not answered the question she had put herself, what did Videhi think of her now? Videhi loved her mother deeply and would not criticise her. But Shalini felt that the very fact that she had posed such

a question was an indication that she was nervous of the possible answer. Then she shook herself.

I am inventing problems. I must work.

She went to the back garden where Vishnu was crawling happily about and Sakuntala was pouring water on him. She let them be.

If I change them now, they'll only get dirty and wet again in a moment. I'll clean them later.

She went in to prepare the evening meal.

Videhi came in soon after from school with a bundle of books under her arm. Shalini looked at her closely, trying to see her with the eye of a stranger. Videhi was thirteen, slim, small but very straight. She wore a white cotton sari with a thin red border. Her hair hung in two plaits down her back. It was thick, long, beautiful hair. On her wrists were no bangles, nor necklace round her throat. In her hair was a champa flower, rich and yellow, and heavy with perfume.

'Why have you got the flower?' asked Shalini.

'I brought it for you, but I forgot, you were staring at me so. I plucked it from the tree in school.'

She gave it to Shalini, who put it in a saucer with some water.

'It is a lovely flower and a lovely gift. I was not staring at you, Videhi; I was trying to look at you as though for the first time, as a stranger might look at you.'

'Why should a stranger want to look at me?' said Videhi, and she put her books away.

She came back and asked Shalini if she should bring the children in.

'Yes, please. Get them ready and clean for bed.'

Videhi had occupation enough, and so had Shalini with her cooking. She still looked at Videhi's face every now and then, watching the mouth smile and the eyes

light up as she caught hold of Vishnu, watching the relapse of the features into stillness for a moment, watching then the thin delicate lines, and the soft curve of the flesh over the bones, the broad brow and the straight nose. It is not the features, it is the life behind them that counts, she thought. And the life and light are there, shaded with lovely reticence, untouched and unspoilt. People said now that Shubha would be the beauty of the family.

Perhaps she will, thought Shalini, but it will be the beauty of the soft rounded flesh of women that will disappear after youth. Videhi will always be beautiful, with that slightly cold, slightly distant look, that consciousness of deep reserves that will win worship and respect and the strongest admiration for her throughout life, if only she meets the men fine enough themselves to recognise greatness.

How strange, she added as an afterthought, that I should say to myself men, when now it is only I, a woman, who perceives it. And why should I think of men in respect of Videhi? Shame on you, Shalini.

And she called sharply on Videhi to finish quickly with Vishnu and get the other children in. She wanted to break the chain of her thoughts.

‘Has Ganesh come?’ she asked immediately afterwards as Videhi went out to call in Shubha and Sakuntala.

‘Yes,’ answered Videhi. ‘He is marking books. Do you want him?’

‘Ask him if he would like a cup of tea. I can make one quite easily.’

Videhi went out.

Her sisters were growing up also into independent beings, but their characters were different from that

of Videhi. She had shared in the mothering and upbringing of them and had a deep affection for them. Vishnu was still a baby, cheerful and happy, and quite unaware of his unique position in the family. Neither Shalini nor Ganesh had as yet any firm ideas about his future. Ganesh day-dreamed of his son. He knew the dreams had no reality, but he hoped his son would be able to progress and rise above his own sphere of life. When he talked about this to Shalini she only said, 'There is nothing wrong with our life.'

She thought Ganesh was interpreting happiness in terms of money and material prosperity and the ability to be able to exercise power. She herself thought it lay in quietness and acceptance. Ganesh told her she was too conservative. Videhi thought privately that they were both wrong—a future was not just an ever-flourishing career, nor was it just passive toleration. She vaguely felt one could aim at some great experience and still live a simple life, and achieve the quality of greatness she admired.

To see all this in Vishnu's chubby face was absurd. The child had to grow, to become himself. She did not realise that Shalini had in mind the unspoken fear that all might be sacrificed for only one of the family, and that one would necessarily be the boy Vishnu. When Shalini examined herself she wondered how far she was trying to prepare herself to make such a sacrifice by insisting on the goodness of quiet obscurity, and by accepting her own fate so calmly.

'What else could I do?' she asked herself.

Chapter Eight

THE TWO older girls, Shubha and Vasanti, now ten and nine respectively, were cheerful and noisy, and were perpetually playing pranks in the compound and school. Physically they seemed stronger and more robust than Videhi, and people said they would grow up into beautiful girls, easily marriageable. Sakuntala was rather like Videhi, thin and quiet. Shalini was often worried about her health. Every year, whatever children's ailment was abroad, Sakuntala caught it and took long to recover.

The children were all happy. It surprised Shalini that with so much illness and pain and difficulty, which she felt so acutely, the family could continue so cheerfully. Then she thought how unobservant children were, and how tolerant of conditions so long as they are customary, and how lacking in powers of introspection, except for Videhi. She was glad. It was as though, in spite of herself, she had succeeded and achieved her task. She began to talk occasionally to Videhi about the future, about possible careers, to see if she could discover within the child the line she would like to follow. She knew that Videhi would make a good housewife in the richest and the simplest senses, and that she had the willingness and the skill to create a beautiful home. She knew Videhi would be capable of intense affection, and would be loyal, but she wondered whether she wanted it. Marriages, however, were not so easily arranged, nor could she offer Videhi with any certainty, despite her own desires, the choice between a career and marriage.

A career was another matter. There were not many open to women. Possibly the future India might create more. If Videhi was able to go to college and take her degree some form of teaching or medicine would be free for her. A degree in itself, as Shalini was well aware, would raise her marriage value. The road to a degree could only be travelled by Videhi through scholarships. When she spoke to Videhi about teaching in a college or school or being a doctor, she always elicited interest, but Videhi seemed to view the possibilities equally and without preference.

‘What do you want to do?’ Shalini would ask. And Videhi would reply, ‘What did you want to do when you were young, Mother?’

‘When we are young we often have strange ideas that just cannot be,’ said Shalini.

‘Perhaps it is like that with me,’ said Videhi. ‘I don’t know what I want to be. I would like to do something, something that would be beautiful and be remembered. I would like to read all the great books.’

‘They are not easy,’ said Shalini. ‘They are difficult books for old men who are scholars and learned in philosophy.’

‘They were not written for old men,’ said Videhi. ‘They were written for men and women.’

‘People say they are dangerous books,’ said Shalini. ‘I, too, wanted to read all that, but I have not been able. I only know their ideas eat into your imagination, and perhaps set it on fire, perhaps destroy it, perhaps pervert it.’

‘I can understand that they would give me strength,’ said Videhi, ‘but I cannot see how they could harm me.’

‘No,’ said Shalini. ‘That is what we never see. We think only the bad things can harm us, but the good also can. Still, read the books if you can get them and

tell me about them, and then I, too, will have half-fulfilled a wish of my youth.'

'You are not old, Shalini.'

'Perhaps not, but when one's children grow up it makes one seem old. That is what worries me. I want to see you safely in the future. I want to know what you will be, what you want to be.'

Videhi wondered by herself why her mother had not mentioned the possibility of marriage. It was a common topic amongst the girls at school of her age. It was one of the themes of the films and current novels. The argument was between a romantic marriage, in which the freedom of choice of the West was copied, and an arranged one. In practice, for all the girls, the arranged marriage by their parents was the rule. No doubt the whole thing was carefully considered, but the girls knew that their husband would be a stranger to them, or if not a stranger at least not a partner chosen by them. Fear and excitement coloured their outlook; it was so common that they accepted it as inevitable, but they fed their imaginations with the romantic theme. And to them it was purely, absurdly romantic. That they themselves could exercise wisdom and discretion and consider the question practically was impossible. Love suddenly came for a stranger, and they dreamed of being able to accept it immediately, if only they had the courage, but they had not the courage or the power of will. So they loved the more the films and the novels, and they knew that their married sisters solaced themselves with this strange unreal version of what might have been.

Videhi had seen the films occasionally and read the books. They were as common in Marathi as in Hindi. She despised them. She sensed their tawdriness and untruth, and she had too much pride and reserve to

indulge in day-dreams based upon these images. If, however, she rejected the consideration of romantic love as unworthy, she did not reject the consideration of love itself. The passion and the physical joy of love were beyond the scope of her experience and imagination. She felt that love must be pure and lasting. She felt Shalini and Ganesh had missed it, though she could not tell why. She loved her father, even though at school she had often to listen to the girls making fun of him. For her mother not only was there love but a deep admiration for the courage with which adversity had been borne, and also a respect slightly tinged with fear for her mother's will. Shalini's will moulded the house. Videhi was content. It had not hurt her, nor did she think of it hurting her. She trusted it.

The school was residential, although it took in day-pupils, such as Videhi. The boarders were very carefully looked after and only went out under the supervision of the teachers. At the end of term parents either came for their girls or sent servants to take them home. For the older girls the journey was not without interest. The students from the university would come to the railway station at the cantonment, and walk up and down the platform talking loudly about the girls who were waiting in the train. Sometimes they brought flowers and threw them into the compartment just as the train was due to start. Sometimes they even threw in passionately worded letters. To the girls these last few minutes at the railway station were a thrill, a delight, a translation into reality of the romance they had heard or seen. At the end of the school year, when Videhi was fifteen, one of the girls called Shanti left for the station. She was being met at Mogal Sarai, the big junction a few miles beyond Kashi for the main Bombay-Howrah route.

At the station there was the usual crowd of poor bewildered people and the coolies with their red torn coats and big brass badges. The young men were walking up and down. They had bought some English magazines from the station bookstall and were talking loudly about them. The girls looked to see if they had any flowers, but they could not tell. When the boys came near the compartment they looked boldly in, and the girls turned away and spoke rapidly and loudly amongst themselves about the rudeness of the young men. Shanti got up and said she would buy a magazine, and she went to the bookstall. The train was ready to start, and she had to hurry back. Instead of getting into the girls' compartment she got into the next one, and as the train moved out of the station one of the students followed her and jumped in.

The girls were part astonished and part horrified. At Mogal Sarai, Shanti got out and the boy, Brij Mohan, slipped away and returned by another train to Kashi. The girls themselves had no time to question Shanti. They did not know whether the compartment had been empty or occupied. They did not know whether the incident had been arranged or was just an accident, a piece of bravado on the part of the boy.

News of it came quickly to the school people and all the compound were talking about it. In the long hot days of summer it was a very welcome topic. Gossip magnified the event and invented details. Opinion hardened into three groups. Videhi heard it all. The neighbours who came to Shalini spoke continuously of it. Ganesh talked about it. He blamed the girl, and said it was a shameless indecent thing that she had done, bringing dishonour and ill repute upon herself, and the school, and Indian womanhood. He was really very angry about it. Others cast the blame upon the school.

What is the use, they said, of sending a girl to a school if the school cannot look after her properly? These also assumed that the girl had done wrong, and were quite certain that the event had been planned. Another reason they thought of for blaming the school, was that if it was planned, then letters must have passed between Brij Mohan and Shanti, and how had the school authorities allowed that? Kinder people said it must just have been an accident, that there had been no plan or conspiracy between the two. Shalini was of this opinion.

‘All we know,’ she said, ‘is just gossip, probably very much exaggerated. The fairest thing is to assume that nothing happened.’

The next question on people’s tongues was whether Shanti would come back, or even whether the school authorities would admit her again. Many said that she ought to be told not to return. Others said she was sure to come back, if only for Brij Mohan’s sake. On the first day of the autumn term every girl in the school seemed to know about Shanti and to be looking for her. She was not there. Rumour spread that she had committed suicide in shame. Others said that she had run away from home to Brij Mohan, that Brij Mohan was also not present in his college. The girls had never known such an exciting first day. When Ganesh came home he told Shalini all about the rumours and the new stories, but she said. ‘I know already, everybody in the compound knows. They are all talking the same things.’ Ganesh was convinced that the girl was bad. He had always been outspoken in his condemnation, but now there was no limit to the severity of his terms.

‘She is worse than a prostitute,’ he said.

Videhi thought this was horrible, and said so. Her father at once got extremely unreasonably angry.

‘You must not speak to me like that. This girl has

betrayed Hindu womanhood. There is nothing too shameful that one can say about her. She is wicked, immoral, perverted. And if you believe she is right, then you are wicked too. I won't have it. Not in my house. Not from my daughters. A woman has one place only, either in the home of her father and mother or the home of her husband and children. And in both there is only one way of behaviour that is tolerated. Anything else 'is sin.'

He spoke as if Videhi were Shanti, as though she herself were guilty.

Videhi was terrified as well as horrified and she burst into tears. Sakuntala and Vasanti came to her, amazed that their Videhi had done something wrong. Shalini was silent. She was surprised at her husband's anger, although she was accustomed to his exaggeration in speech. He might be right or wrong about Shanti, probably wrong, but what he had said about Hindu women was true. She accepted it. She thought Videhi had accepted it, and that the harsh speech of her father would do no real harm.

Next day the school authorities got a letter from Shanti's parents to say that she was not coming back to the school, as she was going to be married in her home in Bombay. A formal gilt wedding-card invitation was also enclosed. The marriage was to take place within a week. The bridegroom was the son of a rich mill-owner from Ahmedabad. The girls, when they got married, usually invited the Principal or one or more of the teachers to their wedding, and if it was at all possible and the place not too far away, the invitation was accepted, for the occasion was one when the bride's parents were inclined to be generous and contribute a gift to the school fund. The bride herself would insist on that. Now the gossip changed from Shanti's scandal to Shanti's marriage, and

whether the Principal would go, and how much money would be given. Ganesh, when he told Shalini about it, said they could easily give five thousand rupees, but even a thousand would be welcome. He had forgotten his anger and his bitter words. He felt now only the interest of the school in securing a rich gift.

Videhi was ashamed of it all. Never once had they considered Shanti. Now that she was making a rich marriage they thought her good. But no-one asked, said Videhi to herself, if Shanti wanted it. Wealth and obedience had redeemed her name. But what had she really wanted? Videhi felt an intense desire to talk to Shanti, to ask her what she wanted, to ask her what her heart felt like. She thought for a moment she would write to her, but abandoned that idea.

‘If I had known her at all,’ she said to herself, ‘I would, but I am really a stranger to her.’

The marriage was over and the school richer by five hundred rupees. It was less than they expected, but they knew they would get another gift when Shanti’s first child was born. It was monsoon time now and the rains were heavy. The Ganges was rising and the current flowing very fast. The ghats at the riverside were covered with water, and after one heavy fall of rain some of the narrow streets were full to a depth of a foot with water. People did not mind. When the rain was so heavy the school bus was unable to go out into the city to bring in the day girls, and a rain holiday was declared, and the sudden unexpected freedom pleased everybody.

Videhi was taking part in the English play, and she was keen to do well. There had been great dispute about which play to choose. At first it had been agreed they should do some scenes from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. It was conventional. They knew they could do it well, and that they could successfully present it in an Indian

setting without damaging the play or the scenes they had chosen. They were only going to do two or three carefully chosen scenes. Some suggested that it was wrong to do a foreign play, and instead they proposed an English version of *Sakuntala*. There were heated arguments about it in the staff-room. In the end *Sakuntala* won. In the play Videhi had the part of one of the friends of Sakuntala in her home in the forest before she meets the king. She knew the whole play and loved it. The warm gaiety and colour delighted her, and the gentleness pleased her, and the poet had softened the harsh things that happen to Sakuntala. How rich and good India must have been when Kalidasa wrote his play! And even then Kashi was an old city, and her ways of life had been unchanged for generations. Videhi could close her eyes and see her mother Shalini in Sakuntala's time, and there would be no change, no discrepancy. She realised, as she thought, that a habit of mind and behaviour and outlook in India's womenfolk so deep-rooted and unchanged must have had great qualities to survive. If only people could see how beautiful it was too, she thought, dreaming of Sakuntala talking to herself and Shalini. That night she looked at the stars and knew that they had once looked down on Sakuntala's flower-strewn hermitage, and they had seen Sakuntala and her king lover together. Sakuntala had not been ashamed to love, she had not been afraid to love, she had not been unwilling to love. Love had been no problem to Sakuntala, but the loveliest event in a life rich in loveliness and delicacy.

Videhi was growing in strength of mind and richness of imagination. Without her being aware of it, confidence was coming increasingly to her and fecundating her will. She was no longer a thin slip of a schoolgirl, overquiet and reserved. Shalini was never tired of

watching her and admiring her beauty and grace. One could look into Videhi's eyes and see in them joy, fresh as perfume from flowers, and behind that joy were other qualities: the wisdom of youth which sees so clearly the edges of right and wrong, and the wonder of youth at the bright world opening up before it, and, deepening all this, the consciousness of womanhood aware of its own special and unique powers that out of pain breed hope. Her hair was soft and thick and black, and when she was combing and brushing it, the hair was a veil over her white sari that made her like a forest nymph. Slim and straight, she seemed unaware of her beauty.

The school authorities were conscious of her abilities and distinction and had told Ganesh that they would assist her to complete her studies up to a degree. Her teachers talked about a career. They themselves had chosen, or had thrust upon them by fate, a career. They felt proud of their work. Often it was tedious and hum-drum. Often they felt slightly ashamed at some of the compromises they were forced to accept. They wondered indeed at times how far their work was successful at all, and then they regretted their comparatively lonely lives and envied those women who were married and had families.

In the staff-room Ganesh had frequent and sometimes rude arguments with them.

'We can teach girls,' he said, 'but we must not lead them out of the path to which they belong.'

He always insisted that the girl's proper place was home. He would say this in such a way as to imply that his fellow teachers were themselves out of place. The personal argument made the others very angry and they would ask Ganesh how should fathers, if they have daughters, look after them? They said there was only one way of looking after them properly and that was

through education. Even if you do not want a career for your daughter, you must still give them education if you wish them to make good marriages. Husbands insisted on educated brides. It was almost part of the wedding price, 'Unless, of course, you don't mind if the girls marry a chowkidar or a tonga driver,' they would add, and this thrust at his poverty silenced Ganesh. He would repeat these arguments at home to Shalini. She listened. It was all commonplace. She knew Ganesh was argumentative and did not possess real convictions.

'It only matters,' she said, 'when there is an actual case, an actual girl.'

'No,' said Ganesh, 'there is a principle behind it all. We must not consider the individual but only the general thesis.'

He would go on to add that women could not argue, that they did not understand logic, that they were not sufficiently mentally detached.

'Women are too close to life to be detached,' said Shalini, 'but we know what is right or wrong all the same.'

Videhi took no part in the talk. She was aloof, reading, lost in her studies. The house was too small for her to have any privacy for her work, and she was always in the midst of some conversation of which she was vaguely conscious. In the evenings she sat with her books upon a chowki; sometimes the other girls were also working, more often they were playing. Her parents were talking, or Ganesh was still at his corrections. The circumstances made study difficult, but she acquired the habit of concentration despite the distractions, and this power seemed to grow with her. One evening she had finished her school work early. Shubha and Vasanti were also busy. Ganesh was correcting. Sakuntala and Vishnu were in the kitchen with Shalini. Videhi took up a volume of plays and was soon utterly lost. She was

reading *Peer Gynt*, and she was enthralled. Suddenly she was called back to the life within her own home. Sakuntala and Vasanti were quarrelling bitterly over a toy that both claimed. They were crying, and Shalini was scolding them both, and Ganesh was shouting in anger.

‘How can I work in all this noise? Why don’t you, Videhi, look after your sisters?’ What were you doing?’

‘I was reading Ibsen,’ said Videhi.

‘Oh,’ said Ganesh. ‘*A Doll’s House*, I suppose. A fine play for a young girl to read.’

He had not read it himself, but he knew vaguely, as people do, its contents and reputation.

‘Next thing,’ he went on, ‘you’ll be slamming the door in my face.’

Videhi said nothing. Shalini soothed the crying children and Ganesh went on blackly with his corrections. Videhi had read *A Doll’s House* some time before. She had not liked it. There was, she thought, no loveliness in the character of Nora, only a cold will. For the first time she thought there is no loveliness in our house either, and not even a cold will, only frustrated wills that smoulder into anger or resentment. She put the book away and asked Shalini if she could help her.

‘No, it is nothing. The children will go to bed soon. You go on with your reading.’

Videhi was too upset to read any more.

She went out of the front door and stood staring at the compound. It was quite dark, and from various quarters lights could be seen.

‘And what goes on in there?’ thought Videhi. ‘More angry families, more shouting and more distress.’

The night air was warm and heavy with the perfume from the lime and lemon trees and the flowering bushes; above, the purple darkness mottled with a few white

clouds and the clear bright moon; beyond, the stars in their myriad clusters. Her emotions changed. The beauty of the night always thrilled her and was ever new to her. She saw in her mind the same sky over the pine-clad Norwegian fjords, and Peer Gynt alone with the beauty of the stars. It would be cold there, very cold at night; and she remembered the birth that took place on the hillside and the loneliness of the poor woman. A woman's place might be home, but what if there were no home? And a man's place? And could not a woman be always really homeless?

Shalini called her in.

'You should sleep now,' she said. 'Ganesh and I are going to bed soon.'

Videhi got ready for bed, but she could not sleep, for the question had suddenly come to her—what was her place? What was she to do? She found no answer. The way people talked about marriage and a career did not touch her. The question remained; it kept in her brain, and her brain refused to think out an answer, but retained only the question, perplexing and tormenting. There was no peace for her. She saw herself also alone and a wanderer and without help. She had been restless for quite a time when she realised that her parents had not yet come to bed. Perhaps Ganesh was still working and her mother waiting up for him. Perhaps they were talking in the warm night air in the back garden as they sometimes did when they wanted to talk away from the children. Probably Ganesh was still angry and Shalini was calming him by letting him talk. She wished sleep would come.

Shalini had called her husband to the garden.

'You should not have said that to Videhi,' she began. 'She is not a child any more and you know you were quite unfair.'

‘The others were making an awful noise. I just could not work,’ said Ganesh.

‘What you said was very unkind. You forget that Videhi understands and can be easily hurt.’

‘I’m her father. I have a right to say what I want to her.’

‘Yes,’ answered Shalini, ‘but you must not be unfair, and you must remember that Videhi is a growing woman.’

‘She’s still a schoolgirl,’ said Ganesh, ‘and I don’t believe in schoolgirls reading such plays.’

‘You can’t stop her reading now, Ganesh, it is too late. But it was not about books that I wanted to talk. I wanted to talk about Videhi. She may be still at school, but she’s no longer a schoolgirl.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Ganesh.

‘I mean she’s a woman now and old enough for marriage.’

‘She’s only sixteen,’ said Ganesh, ‘and she’s the daughter of a poor schoolteacher. Who will marry her?’

‘Who is going to marry the four daughters of a poor schoolteacher?’ asked Shalini. ‘If we can get Videhi well and happily married now it will make it easier for the other girls and also for Vishnu.’

‘I see that,’ said Ganesh, ‘but I still do not see who is going to marry Videhi.’

‘You don’t even try to think,’ said Shalini. ‘You look on Videhi as a schoolgirl. She is not that at all. She is a woman, and beautiful, too. I thought that at least would be apparent to you. She is clever, cleverer than the girls here, and talented. You know the school thinks very highly of her. Everybody does. I think myself . . . but I would be embarrassed if I told you that. She is loving, kind, obedient, and very, very attractive.’

'I've never thought about her in that way,' said Ganesh, 'but I suppose you are right. There is certainly something different about Videhi.'

'We must do something for her,' said Shalini. 'If she marries well it will be easier for all the others.'

'Of course,' said Ganesh. 'But what do you want me to do?'

'Write a letter to your cousin in Poona, the one in the I.C.S. His son, Kalyan, is about twenty now and is unmarried. Tell him about Videhi. You have only to tell him the truth. If he comes here and sees Videhi there will be no difficulty.'

'What can I say?' asked Ganesh. 'It is not easy to write such a letter. He knows I have four daughters. He knows how poor we are. He will take no notice of the letter.'

'We can only try,' said Shalini persuadingly.

'What about Videhi?' asked Ganesh.

'We are acting in her interests,' said Shalini. 'I will talk to her when the time comes. Why you are afraid on the score I don't know. You are always talking about the good Hindu wife. I expect some of it has sunk into your daughters' heads.'

'There's no need for you to be unkind,' said Ganesh. 'I will think about it. It is years since I have seen Rampande and I don't know anything about his son, Kalyan.'

'Kalyan has always been a good boy. He takes his degree this year, and then he will go to England for further studies. I know they would like to get him married before he goes to England. It is so unsafe for our young men there,' said Shalini.

'I'll think about it,' said Ganesh again.

'You must not say anything to Videhi,' said Shalini. 'You must leave her to me.'

The next day, while Ganesh and the children were at school, Shalini sat down to write. She had made up her mind to write to Rampande's wife; she felt it would be easier and simpler that way, and also more direct, for she was sure Rampande would be ruled by his wife. It was not easy writing. She made several attempts. She would have to ask them to Kashi, but she did not want, nor could she have done, to indicate plainly the real reason for the visit. Yet she had to make it apparent. She wrote in the end:

'My dear Lakshmi,

It is so long since we met or wrote to each other, but Ganesh often talks about Rampande, and hopes that our son, Vishnu, will be like his uncle. We are all well here, and very happy in holy Kashi.

We hear that Kalyan will be going to England soon. It would be nice if he could come to Kashi before he left India, and we would all welcome you. We live, of course, simply, but I don't think you would mind that. Videhi may be going to college soon. She is very clever, and if you come here you will see whether or not she is beautiful.

Do write and let me know if you can come.

With best wishes,

Your affectionate cousin,
Shalini.'

That evening, when they were alone together, Ganesh told her he would not write to his cousin. He was not going to beg anything. He was not going to trade in his daughter's happiness. He could not bring himself to it. It was not for him to go round offering his daughters, it was for people to come to him asking for them. Shalini said nothing. She did not mention the letter

she had written. She noticed during the next few days, which were anxious ones for her, that Ganesh was kinder and softer-spoken to Videhi. She was glad of that, though she felt inwardly angry, for the kindness was really a screen for his weakness. She felt his refusal to take action, to do anything at all at this stage, was criminal. She thought, he has always been content to drift. He did not mind me bearing the children one after the other,' and now he does not care about their future. Her anger at Ganesh and her anxiety for a reply to her letter made her short-tempered, and she spoke several times quite sharply to her daughters.

Ten days passed and Shalini was beginning to abandon hope. The postman came about ten in the morning when luckily all the family were away. Each day she had watched him come into the compound, and asked him if there were any letters. Again he said no. She felt suddenly hopeless. But at lunchtime Ganesh came home full of excitement. He had received a letter direct at school from Rampande. His cousin said that his wife, Lakshmi, wanted to see Kashi and also wanted Kalyan to see it before he left for England. They would be very pleased if they could stay with Ganesh. They would arrive in, about a week's time and stay only a day or two. Nothing was said about Videhi. Nothing was said about her letter to Lakshmi. Shalini was overjoyed. Ganesh, too, was happy. He thought the visit was unsolicited, and was proud that his cousin had thought of him. Shalini felt the joy of knowing that things were beginning to turn one's way.

Chapter Nine

THE NEXT few days Shalini worked hard. She had the house scoured and swept. She bought new covers for the chowkis. She spent hours in the kitchen making special Marathi sweets. She went and borrowed from a neighbour the extra beds and bedding they would need. She got the girls' clothes and examined them carefully. Should she buy them new ones or not? Better, perhaps, to spend the money on a sari for Videhi and herself. It was years since she had bought a new sari for herself, but she felt this time she must.

'Kalyan must not be scared by a grey shabby mother, though I don't suppose he'll look at me. But I won't take any risks.'

She arranged for a party of her neighbours to come to visit her cousin. Ganesh was astonished at what she did. Videhi could not understand it, and the other children were pushed about so much that they were afraid, and looked upon their aunt from Poona as a dreadful ogre so often were they told they must be good and behave properly.

'I shall be glad,' said Shubha to Videhi, 'when she is gone.'

They were due to arrive about eleven o'clock in the morning. Ganesh was to take leave from school, and Shalini said that Videhi also should stay away.

'I must have someone in the house to help me,' she said. 'I'll need you, and it's good that the other children will be at school.'

• The evening before their arrival she showed Videhi

the saris she had bought for herself and her daughter. Both were of silk; one a deep red with a gold border and golden mango-leaf patterns on the palla, the other a creamy white with a gold border. The cream one was for Videhi.

'I have never worn anything so splendid before, Shalini,' said Videhi, 'and I am sure we cannot afford it.'

'The money is our business,' Shalini said, 'not yours. You deserve a sari like this. I wish I could have got you a better one. I want you to wear it because I am proud of you. And I want you to wear this, too,' and she gave her a gold chain for her neck.

'My mother gave me that, and now I am giving it to you.'

Videhi was happy. She was not vain, but she liked lovely things, and she thought this sari, the first silk one she had ever worn, very beautiful.

Next morning everybody was up early. The children were packed off to school and warned again to be on their best behaviour. Shalini went to the kitchen, and left Videhi and Ganesh to complete the last tidying of the house.

'You must bathe at ten and then change,' said Shalini to Videhi, 'and you'd better get off to the station at ten, Ganesh.'

'The train is not due in until eleven, and it only takes twenty minutes to get there,' said her husband in protest.

Shalini would not listen.

'Have you ordered a tonga?' she continued.

She was so busy and energetic in the kitchen, cutting vegetables, grinding the dals and massala, washing the rice, and mixing the atta, that Ganesh just retired. At ten he went off to the station.

'Ask the man to send his best fresh pan,' called out Shalini, as he left. 'There is nothing so good as this pan, not even in Poona.'

Videhi had bathed and changed. Shalini looked at her in her new sari. She was very happy. She was *undoubtedly beautiful, and the sari suited her well*. The cream was a better background than the white cotton Videhi had so far worn.

'You must wait now,' said Shalini, 'until they come. Wait in the front room. You must not come into the kitchen whilst I am cooking in case you get splashed with oil or something. They won't be long now.'

Videhi waited. She wondered what her Aunt Lakshmi would be like.

'I suppose she'll be like the parents of the richer girls at school.'

And then she thought about Kalyan. How nice to be going to England! They had not said what he would study or where he would go. He was probably very clever and a bit supercilious, for he would know they were poor, and that she had never left Kashi except once as a child to go to the hills. Her mother called.

'How much time is there?'

'It is ten to eleven,' said Videhi. 'They'll be at least another half an hour. I wish you would let me help you.'

'No,' said Shalini. 'You know there is no need. I have done most of it now.'

Before long the sound of a tonga was heard stopping outside the house. Videhi called Shalini, who went out. Videhi stayed inside. She greeted her Aunt Lakshmi and Kalyan as they came in. Their small house seemed so full again. She wondered what it would be like when all the children were at home. The visitors were travel-stained, and Shalini was arranging for them to bathe.

She asked Kalyan to go first, and Ganesh took him to their bathroom in the back garden.

'We live very simply here' said Shalini. 'We have not the space or the rooms of a big bungalow.'

'It looks very nice,' said Lakshmi. 'Is it hot in the summer?'

'Yes,' answered Shalini, 'but we manage all right. We sleep out at night and have the fan in the daytime.'

Lakshmi spoke to Videhi.

'Should not you be at school?'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'but Mother asked me to stay at home to help her.'

'And are you going to college later?'

'Perhaps,' said Videhi, and she was surprised, for she had never previously given even herself a decision that way.

'You will have to be clever for that,' went on Lakshmi.

'Do you think you can do it?'

'I know I can work hard,' said Videhi.

Her aunt turned to Shalini.

'Rampande would have liked to come, but just now he is so busy in the courts. He has too much work.'

And they continued talking about Poona relatives and acquaintances.

Videhi thought her aunt a kindly person, almost homely despite her rich sari. She was very much like Shalini in build, age and appearance, but softer and less worn by care. Though Mother looks well now, thought Videhi; she is excited and happy as a child. Kalyan and Ganesh came in.

'Come with me,' said Shalini to Lakshmi, 'and you, too, Videhi. You help me in the kitchen whilst your aunt bathes.'

Videhi went readily. All she had to do was to set out

the talis and fill little dishes with pickles. The cooking was done. She could hear Ganesh and Kalyan talking in the front room. Ganesh was asking about his father and his work, and Kalyan was answering very politely.

‘I see you have a lot of books,’ he said to Ganesh.

‘Most of them are mine, some of them are Videhi’s. She is the reader in the family now.’

‘She reads all these?’ asked Kalyan.

‘Yes,’ answered Ganesh, ‘and more. I suppose you also read?’

‘Yes,’ Kalyan answered shortly.

‘And what are you going to do in England?’

‘I shall take a degree at Oxford, and read for the Bar at the same time.’

Lakshmi had finished and was then in the kitchen.

‘Your house is small,’ she said to Shalini, ‘but very charming. You do all the cooking yourself?’

‘Yes,’ answered Shalini. ‘We keep to the old ways here. We find them best, don’t we, Videhi?’

Videhi did not know what to reply. She thought privately that they had not much choice. Luckily the other children, the three girls and Vishnu, came running from school. Lakshmi was delighted with them.

‘What a lovely family you have got,’ she said. ‘How proud you must be.’

In a few moments, when the children had washed, they all sat down on the floor in the kitchen to eat. Shalini and Videhi served whilst the others ate. Shubha and Vasanti were very talkative and kept asking Kalyan questions about Poona. He answered them laughingly, and Lakshmi spoke to Ganesh and Shalini. She praised the food highly and said that for all her long stay in Kashi Shalini had not forgotten Maharashtra.

‘How could one forget?’ said Shalini.

Ganesh began to tell about the Maratha group in Kashi, how they met, and their interest in Marathi songs and poetry and literature.

'You know Shalini has written,' he said, 'though lately, with all the cares of the household and the children, she has ceased. But Videhi has her gift.'

Videhi wondered how her father could boast so. It was years since Shalini had written, and for herself she had only done essays at school.

When the meal was over Shalini asked Ganesh to take Lakshmi and Kalyan into the front room; she would bring in the pan and supari. Videhi and Shubha would clear the things, and the other children were to play in the garden until it was time for their school again. She told Videhi to change her sari first.

'Let the children come with us,' said Lakshmi, 'for we will have so little time with them, and then later, after they have gone, we can have a long talk together.'

'Ganesh will take you out in the evening,' said Shalini. 'It will be cooler then and pleasanter, and tomorrow I will take you to the Hanuman ghat and the Gyan Vapi and the temple, and to the shops in Chowk. Some of my friends will come in for tea—it is too difficult to cook a big meal for many—and in the evening we will all go on the river.'

The programme was a busy one, but unless it was all arranged and clear, Shalini knew time would pass without anything being accomplished.

After lunch and when the children had returned to school Videhi came in again with her new sari on and sat quietly in a corner next to Shalini. The adults were talking about Poona and old friends and incidents. Videhi and Kalyan were each silent. He was dressed now in kurta and pyjama, although he had come in a suit. He was certainly different from the somewhat

noisy, flashy students of the local university. She thought he was accompanying his mother out of a sense of duty and loyalty, and she respected him for that. She felt he would be a little bored with his stay in Kashi. Only after long residence in the city did one grow to love it, and he had come from a richer and more modern atmosphere. From the conversation she was trying to piece out Kalyan's character and tastes, but all she could gather were odd items of information. He was studious and, his mother said, ambitious. He wanted to get on, and he wanted India to progress. She gathered that his interests lay in the possibilities of the economic and social development of India, rather than in the political field. This may have been a reflection due to his father's official position in the Indian Civil Service. When Ganesh introduced casually the topic of the Congress, Kalyan spoke for the first time:

'It is competence we want, not oratory.'

Lakshmi was just as orthodox as Shalini, and she assumed that Kalyan accepted that orthodoxy.

After tea Ganesh said they could go out now.

'Perhaps you would like to see Videhi's school,' he said to Lakshmi, 'only Kalyan won't be allowed in. Or perhaps you would like to go to Sarnath. We have just time.'

Lakshmi said that she would see the school later; she wanted to see Sarnath herself, and she was sure that Kalyan would like to see it. He said yes. Ganesh ordered two tongas. He sat in one with Kalyan, and Videhi went with Lakshmi in the other.

'You must tell me about Sarnath,' said Lakshmi.

'You have to forget it is ruins,' said Videhi, 'and must try to recall it as a Buddhist temple of long ago. There is a modern one there with Japanese frescoes, but they seem un-Indian, for the artist has given Japanese faces

to all the characters. And he has painted the scenes of punishment more vividly than the others, and I don't think punishment was ever in Lord Buddha's head. There is a Jain temple there too, but that is ugly with tiles, almost Muslim in fashion. On the road just before we get to Sarnath is a hill at which Sita is said to have stopped once. But the old temple remains are lovely, and the carvings in stone, though broken, are still rich like those on our great temples in the south. And, of course, here they found the Ashoka pillar and the lion capitol. I don't like that much myself. It is so smooth and hard and isolated. We have to be careful also of snakes. They nest in the old ruined stones. I remember once when I came here we were watching and across a flat grassy space that was once the hall of the temple two cobras raced and reared their heads so proudly. It was one of the loveliest things I have ever seen.'

Once at Sarnath they all walked round together and admired the scene and the stupa, and Ganesh talked. He wanted to take them round the museum that was at hand, but Lakshmi suddenly said she was tired, and it was getting late. Indeed it was nearly dark when they arrived home.

'Kashi,' said Videhi to Lakshmi, 'is loveliest at night. The poverty is hidden, and you see only the graceful shapes of the houses and the trees, and you smell the gardens rich in perfumes, and, above, the sky is always deep and kind, not harsh and open as it so often is during the hot day.'

The next day, very early, Shalini went with Lakshmi and Kalyan to the Ganges.

'We will come back soon,' she said to Videhi. 'I don't want you to bathe in the river today with us. When we come back you can take your aunt to the shops, and

Ganesh can take Kalyan to the university. I am sure he would like to see it.'

'Oh, I would like to see the shops too,' said Kalyan.

'Well, we'll see when we come back. Meanwhile, you look after the house, Videhi.'

They came back in an hour or so, and put out their wet clothes to dry in the garden in the sun.

'I'll make you some coffee,' said Shalini, 'and then you can go to Chowk.'

As before, they went in two tongas and left them waiting whilst they went through the shops. Lakshmi loved them and bought several Benarsi saris and silk pieces. Each time she asked Videhi what she liked and what she thought of the material and the design, and Videhi told her. She was enjoying it herself, but she felt sorry for Kalyan. The day passed as planned. Their friends came to tea, most of them Marathi, and they feasted themselves with more Poona gossip. At night they went on the river, all the family, even the young children, and took ice-cream with them. Lakshmi had been to the temple also. The next day they were to leave early in the morning. That night they stayed up late talking, Videhi and Kalyan sitting silently listening. Before she went to bed Lakshmi said quietly to Shalini, 'I will write to you from Poona. Will Ganesh be able to come there soon?' Shalini said yes.

The next day they were gone and Videhi and Ganesh were back at school. Videhi was glad it was over; it had been a crowded two days. Still, she felt she liked Lakshmi, and she was pleased with the sari that Lakshmi had given her before leaving. She was rich with two saris, both new, in one week. She put them away proudly.

The letter came for Shalini in three days. Lakshmi must have talked to Rampande immediately and written at once. It was quite brief. She wrote:

'My dear Shalini,

I have spoken to Rampande and he approves. He would like, however, to see Ganesh as soon as possible to make all the arrangements. Tell me when Ganesh can come.

Yours affectionately,
Lakshmi.'

That night Shalini showed the letter to Ganesh. He was astonished but quite pleased. He knew all that was involved in making the marriage arrangements and was quite happy in that kind of work. He asked Shalini if she had told Videhi.

'Not yet,' said Shalini. 'I shall wait until you return from Poona. I am not afraid of that. She has seen Kalyan and he is a good boy.'

'Yes,' said Ganesh, 'Kalyan is all right, and he will go far. It will be a good match for Videhi. You were quite right. I will take her horoscope with me and get Kalyan's.'

It was February now. Kalyan was due to take his examination in Poona in April and to sail for England at the end of July. He wanted to spend a month in London before going to Oxford. Ganesh went off to Poona and returned full of plans and arrangements in a very short while. The marriage would take place at the end of May or the beginning of June. He had spoken to Kalyan. He was deeply impressed with Videhi and admired her. He said to Ganesh that he did not know a girl could be so young and so beautiful and so clever and so serious and so Hindu. Lakshmi was also very impressed. She said Kalyan would be lucky to get a bride like Videhi. They would be writing any day now.

'You must tell Videhi at once,' said Ganesh.

That afternoon Videhi came back from school with

the other children. Shalini told Shubha to take the younger ones out into the compound.

‘There is something I want to tell you,’ she said to Videhi.

She was nervous and worried. She had delayed mentioning the subject to Videhi because, although she was determined to proceed with the marriage, her actions rather than her will were carrying her along. She had planned for so many years that Videhi should be free from what she had herself endured. She had thought at first that such freedom must lie in leaving Videhi to choose her own way, but time and experience and fear had changed Shalini’s views. She felt a happy marriage with good people in comfortable surroundings would be the best, for then there would be no economic fears and no humiliations arising out of poverty and restrictions. A career sounded attractive, but she had not discovered in Videhi any clear or positive desire for such a career. Her ability was undoubted and she knew the school would help Videhi, but what of the end? Perhaps only a poorly paid job as a teacher. Perhaps its renunciation completely then in marriage. Or perhaps it might make marriage impossible. Was it worth while postponing the chance that she had seized and made now for so many uncertain things? She felt certain that the marriage with Kalyan would bring Videhi happiness and comfort, would give her freedom and leisure to develop richly and maturely. She told herself that she felt certain, that it was her will, and that it would be right for both herself and Videhi.

‘Sit down by me on the chowki,’ she said to Videhi. ‘We have good news for you. You are going to be married, and quite soon, and to Kalyan.’

‘Is that why they came to Kashi?’ asked Videhi. ‘I thought they were just being nice and friendly.’

'They are nice and friendly. You said yourself you liked Lakshmi, and Kalyan is a good boy. He is not foolish or rude or vulgar. He is kind and serious like yourself. I am quite certain you will be happy.'

'Is that why you want me to marry?' asked Videhi.

'Of course,' said Shalini. 'You know we have only your happiness and interest at heart. This will mean a great deal to us also, Videhi. It will become easier for Shubha and Vasanti. And it will be so much better for you. You will have more money, more scope, more power. You have been boxed up in our little house long enough. Now you will be able to go to a better one more fitting for you. It will make Ganesh and I very happy to know that. We have been so poor and have had to deny you and the children much that we would have liked to give. It has not been easy for us.'

'We have always been happy here,' said Videhi.

'I know,' said Shalini, 'and I know that you will never forget our home and your life here. You are going to a better future. I want you to think about that future, Videhi. Tell me you are glad at what we have done.'

'Glad is not an easy word to say, Shalini.'

'If you trust us you will be glad,' said Shalini. 'Surely you trust us?'

'Of course I do.'

'You are not angry either or disappointed?' insisted Shalini.

'How can I say I am disappointed? I have never thought about it before, nor can I be angry with you.'

'All I want, child,' said Shalini, 'is your trust and acceptance.'

'I am your daughter,' said Videhi, 'and I have always given you both. I still do. Please let's not talk about it any more just now.'

‘Ganesh will talk about it,’ said Shalini, ‘it is only natural, and so will the other people and your friends at school. You will have to bear that.’

‘Yes, but give me at least tonight free,’ said Videhi.

‘My dear, you are not losing freedom, you are gaining it. But for tonight there’ll be no more talk.’

Videhi longed for the night to come when she could be alone and think. She felt resentfully how cramped and crowded the house was, and then she was ashamed of the feeling, and recalled how it echoed her mother’s arguments, that her marriage would bring her a new and spacious home. What pressed upon her was the decision that had been made without her knowledge, and the decision she herself had made of acceptance of this. How far was the first fair and how far was the second right? It made no difference to her at this stage that she had at least seen Kalyan. It was true he was young, healthy, clever, cultured and apparently kind. He might have been old or diseased or cruel. He might have been married before and had a family already. She did not consider that of all the possibilities in an arranged marriage she had luckily hit upon one of the most favourable to herself and her family. She only thought that the marriage had been arranged. They asked me to trust them, but they did not trust me beforehand.

At least the issue that faced romantic love had been spared her. She had accepted the marriage. She would not have to think of love again. Why had she accepted it? Almost without thinking, immediately in response to Shalini, she had said yes. Why was that? It was true that she trusted her mother. She was quite certain that Shalini wanted her happiness, but that was a very different thing from being able to guarantee it. It was not the trust that was in doubt, but the happiness. Yet was it even happiness? What was in the list of physical

comforts that Shalini suggested that was so certain? She realised how that with her parents' background and their responsibilities it was natural for them to try to arrange a marriage for her. They could see no other way out for the four girls, and what they had done was justifiable on practical grounds. She did not blame them. They had acted as they were forced to act. Shalini has often said that that is how life works, and I see it is true, communed Videhi within herself. They could not do otherwise. Perhaps, although they forced themselves to the issue, they may have done it with a secret unwillingness. No, I do not think Shalini would have allowed herself to feel that unwillingness, or, being aware of it, consciously to continue to act against it. Why did I accept it? How can one judge these matters? They gave me no real choice. They gave me no time to consider. What is there to consider? All my life I have been obedient. I have been brought up in a tradition of obedience. I have known so many girls at school told, as I have been told, that a marriage has been arranged for them, and I have accepted as they have accepted. It is part of our society and make-up. So I accepted out of habit and out of convention. I, too, was forced to act in this way. What I want, she thought bitterly to herself, is to have accepted because it was right in itself. She lay sleepless on her bed searching for that comfort; her will wanting a moral reason, her imagination unable to supply it.

The conflict troubled her and she had broken sleep with confused dreams, of being lost and alone in the dark, of climbing wearily great high stretches of rock, and then slipping back, and of being in a train that would not stop. She was glad when the dawn came. Shalini noticed how tired she looked and said she should stay at home.

‘We will talk together,’ said Shalini. ‘There is so much to do and so many things to arrange.’

‘Kalyan will be writing to you soon, I expect,’ said Ganesh.

Videhi felt shy and embarrassed.

‘You must not be frightened,’ said Ganesh. ‘It will be quite proper now.’

‘You will be late for school if you don’t hurry, Ganesh,’ said Shalini.

‘You are not frightened, are you?’ asked Shalini, when Ganesh had gone.

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘only tired. I did not sleep well last night. I kept thinking and wondering.’

‘Yes,’ said Shalini, ‘marriage is not an easy thing, nor is any change easy. It will be a different house once you go from us, Videhi. I shall miss you most, but I know the children will too. We have a lot of work to do, but leave all the details to Ganesh and me.’

Shalini would have liked to talk to her about marriage, but she felt Videhi was so tired, and she was also shy herself of saying the things she wanted to say. So she asked Videhi to rest whilst she went about her work, and as she worked she thought what she could say to Videhi. Somehow marriage was a hard state and full of its own problems. Life did not cease being awkward because one was married. If I told her that now, she could ask me why, then, I wanted her to be married at all. What I really want to tell her is that however hard marriage is it is good in itself, because only in and through marriage is full scope allowed to develop love and gentleness and kindness, and that this is especially our women’s privilege. Or perhaps I could say that in marriage we are to expect two things. One, the ordinary run of life’s little harshnesses and setbacks and disappointments, which often seem the

greater in marriage, because of our closeness to the people they affect, our children and our husbands. And two, that in marriage we can expect the gentler blossoming side of life to be given to us, especially in the love of children. I am lecturing myself rather than Videhi, thought Shalini, and she went to see what Videhi was doing. She was asleep on the chowki, and Shalini let her be. I think she knows already, she said to herself.

Videhi woke up soon and Shalini made her some coffee. Videhi suddenly felt how nice it was to be intimate and quiet with Shalini and how rare that experience had been in the past.

'You know,' said Shalini, 'whilst you were sleeping I was thinking what I should tell you, and I had really made a most interesting lecture, but I realised at its end that it was for my benefit, not for yours, so I decided not to give it.'

'I would like to hear it,' said Videhi.

'No,' said Shalini. 'There's lots that one can say and little enough that one can say, but it does not matter yet. Do you feel better now?'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'I think I should really be at school. I don't want to miss anything there.'

'It's not so important now,' said Shalini.

'No, but I like it and I don't want to miss my work.'

Shalini went on to talk about Lakshmi.

'She is very charming. It is a pity we did not meet earlier. I am sure she would have helped us. It is strange how one can go through life unaware of one's real friends. Suddenly you discover them, it is known immediately, quiet, friendly, honest, sincere people, and you wonder why you did not find them earlier.'

Videhi said, 'I liked Lakshmi too.'

The children came back from school. They were full of excitement. Ganesh had told the other teachers,

and the news had quickly spread to the girls that Videhi was to be married.

'You must let me come to Poona,' said Shubha, 'for the holidays.'

'And all of us,' said Vasanti.

'What shall we do without Videhi?'

'And will we have new saris for the wedding?'

They talked and laughed and chattered. Ganesh was very pleased. For once he felt he had completely got the better of the women teachers on the staff.

'They all want to know what Kalyan is like,' said Ganesh. 'I said he was a perfect Marathi gentleman, and would be a perfect son-in-law. They still wanted to know what he was like. I told them Videhi would tell them.'

'But I don't know, Father,' said Videhi.

The next few days at school were difficult for her. The girls were frankly inquisitive. Had she known Kalyan well she would have been too shy to talk about him, and as she did not know him at all she felt even worse. The time passed and the interest died down. Videhi persisted in working hard, though the girls asked her why.

'You can be lazy now and do nothing. Lessons don't matter any more for you,' said the girls.

Videhi ignored them. At home they were busy with preparations for the marriage, both Shalini and Ganesh writing letters to Poona and receiving them. One day Videhi herself received a letter.

'That will be from Kalyan,' said Ganesh. 'Open it and read it.'

'Let her read it in peace,' said Shalini.

Videhi was moved. She had received few letters so far. Once or twice in the year Rukmini had written, and sometimes in the holidays a school-friend wrote. This letter from Kalyan made her look upon herself

as an individual; even more, it made her think of Kalyan as an individual. At that she trembled, for she had refused in her mind to think of him as an individual; she was afraid to discover or to attempt to discover his personality. Now, if he wrote and she wrote back, they would necessarily unfold themselves to each other, and that was a step she was unwilling to take, partly out of modesty, partly out of fear, and partly out of a mixture of wounded pride and indignation at the whole process that she kept submerged in her mind.

‘You must read the letter,’ said Shalini, ‘but there is no need to answer if you are unwilling. We can write that you have received it. Lakshmi will understand and will explain to Kalyan.’

Videhi blushed.

‘I will read it here,’ she said, ‘and acknowledge it if you wish.’

It was a short letter inscribed with a bold hand on thin paper.

Kalyan had written:

‘My dear Videhi,

My mother told me it would be quite proper for me to write to you, and I do so to enquire after your health, and to hope that you are not too disturbed. Our house is in a constant turmoil. My mother and father have but one topic of conversation. I noticed in Kashi that you had read many books. I would like to send you some if you would let me know what kind of book you would like.

Yours affectionately,
Kalyan.’

She gave the letter to Shalini, who read it and passed it to Ganesh.

‘What a curious letter to write,’ said Ganesh.

'Why?' asked Shalini. 'It is a very nice letter, and it is kind of him to ask Videhi about books. It shows a lot of consideration. I think you should answer that letter yourself, Videhi, and tell him about the books.'

Videhi waited a few days and then she wrote. She hesitated for long about what to call him. During the visit to Kashi they had hardly exchanged a single word. She felt shy and awkward to use his name, although he had used hers. He is still my cousin, she thought, I will call him that, and she wrote:

'My dear cousin,

Thank you very much for the letter. We are all well here. Mother and Father send their kind regards and my sisters ask to be remembered to you. It was kind of you to think of sending books. They are my favourites. I do not know whether I want just now to read any one in particular.

I am,

Your affectionate cousin,
Videhi.'

She asked her mother if she would like to read the letter before she sent it.

'Not if you don't wish,' said Shalini. .

'I would like you to read it,' said Videhi.

Shalini approved of the letter. She saw that Videhi was struggling to preserve her own independence and she half pitied, half admired her daughter.

Two books, Proust, and the Japanese novel *Genji*, came by return post with another letter. Kalyan wrote:

'My dear Videhi,

I am sending these books to you as a gift. Please read them and tell me how you like them. You must help me to discover your tastes. I wish I could write

more, but I do not want to offend you. Please give my kind regards to your mother and father and your sisters and your brother.

Your loving cousin,
Kalyan.'

Videhi thought the second letter a little abrupt, and perhaps impertinent—no, not impertinent, but he was angry a little.

I'll write to him, she thought, when I have finished the books. I am glad they are long ones.

Both Ganesh and Shalini looked into the books: Ganesh with a slight displeasure. Shalini had had no time for reading for years, but she still retained her ability to sense immediately the quality and tone of a book, and especially its beauty.

'I envy you,' she said to Videhi, 'being able to read these. You must tell me about them when you have finished.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I will.'

Silently she thought, but I am not going to tell Kalyan. If I like the books I am not going to share that pleasure with him, yet, at least. And if I don't like them I am not going to tell him why. I am not going to submit to a kind of examination by him.

Chapter Ten

MEANWHILE, the more material preparations for the wedding went on. It was to be at Kashi. Kalyan and his parents would come with a large party of friends and relatives. They would hire

a house to accommodate them, one of the old rich houses. Ganesh was busy daily negotiating this and had come down to about three all quite suitable for the occasion. He was bargaining now about the price and he enjoyed it. The actual wedding would take place in the girls' school. It would be quite empty then, and the school hall was just right and had a pleasant imposing appearance. They would use the school courtyards and kitchens for the two or three big meals they would have to give. Again, it was a matter of working out all the cooking materials required and hiring them. Shalini was looking after this. They had already ordered the wedding invitation cards to be printed and were engaged in sending them out. All these and a hundred and one details filled the hours and minds of Ganesh and Shalini. Videhi ignored them. She had her part to play, and it was sufficient. She would not even give an opinion when they asked her, for always there were little questions and problems arising. For the most part Shalini avoided asking her, sensing her feelings, but Ganesh did often. She refused to share her father's speculations about the presents some of the guests would give, perhaps saris, or gold ornaments, or silverware, or even jewels.

She busied herself with her reading. She had not answered Kalyan's letter yet. She was going to keep to her resolve not to answer until she had completed both the books. She had finished *Genji* and liked it, though she thought it dragged a little towards the end and rather repeated itself. But the chivalry and romance set in old-world Japan pleased her, and so did the very feminine psychology of the book. She wondered who the Lady Murasaki was, and why it was that India, so rich in women's names, had produced no woman with creative genius, imaginative genius—the rare scholar,

yes, and the saint, and brave and virtuous women—but none who could stand aside from life and watch it, and then seize and remould its parts into some artistic whole nearer to their heart's desire and nearer to the truth of things.

One day she received the third letter from Kalyan. He wrote:

'My dear Videhi,

I do not understand why you have not written to me. You have not yet acknowledged either my books or my letter. I do not think that is kind. Please let me know if you have received them and if you like them. Do write to me at once.

Your loving cousin,
Kalyan.'

She answered at once and wrote:

'My dear cousin,

I am sorry I did not acknowledge the books or your letter. You asked me to tell you what I thought of them. I was waiting until I had finished. I will write to you then.

Your cousin,
Videhi.'

Within herself she thought how unwilling she would be to write to a stranger about either book. *Genji* was essentially a love story set in the jewelled world of medieval Japan. It was a lovely book, but its themes were the love of men and women, and the changeableness of love, and the constancy and inconstancy of lovers, and the varying natures of love, its degree, its kinds and qualities.

Her own thoughts were different. She did not find life easy, but she thought it could be endured with

pleasure and, perhaps, even with delight if one lived always simply and maintained one's values pure. Personalities should not obtrude. She would not think of herself as a person, nor dared she think of Kalyan as a person. When the word marriage crossed her mind she erected at once a blank wall against it and thrust it out. It was as though she not only resented the inquisitiveness of others into her mind and life, but her own inquisitiveness too. It made her angry, and she realised that anger was a new experience for her, and she was surprised and a little ashamed.

Kalyan wrote another letter. As soon as she received the envelope she knew it was different. It was fat and bulging and he must have written many pages. She was reluctant to open it, and slipped it, unopened, into her book. That evening she continued as usual helping Shalini, reading a little, sewing some blouses for her sisters. It was hot now and, even at night, very still. She went to bed and put the book under her pillow with the letter unread in it. Tomorrow would do for reading it. She could not sleep. She kept thinking about the letter, not in wonder or curiosity as to what it might contain, but in anger that Kalyan had dared to write at such length and presumably expect an equally long letter in return. He is trying to induce romance where there is no romance; that in itself is wrong—even worse the idea that there should be romance at all. Either there is love, or else, if no love, a passive decency and quietness. These were the words she used in her brain but the conclusion gave her no restfulness or sleep, and she still kept awake. For now she was perplexed about the words she had used, love and decency, and could not fit them into her experience. Are they only words after all? Where do we find love outside of books? And what is this decency but a kind of cowardly acquiescence? If

only there was someone with whom she could share thoughts and ideas and fears. She knew Shalini would understand her feelings, but Shalini was also an interested party to the action now in progress. There was no-one with whom she could talk. She was alone, and that realisation hurt and pained her. I have always been alone, now I know I am alone, that is all, she tried to tell herself in consolation.

Next morning she opened the letter. Kalyan began:

‘Dear Videhi,

I am hurt at the shortness of your letter to me. I am not writing to you about books. I am writing about myself and yourself. You know that our marriage is decided upon. You know that this is the old custom of our land, and you must know that there are many who now protest against it. I have felt myself in the past that it was wrong, for young minds are modern minds, and I am sure you, too, have a modern mind. Since I saw you in Kashi I no longer protest. I feel it is right that you and I should marry. If you want me to express myself more clearly, it is that I love you. I do not know what lovers do or should write to each other.

That I should love you seems to me the most natural thing. That you should love me I do not dare even to ask, but I can at least ask you to listen to me. I cannot tell you how I love you or why I love you, but I know I do. I suppose there are all sorts of reasons. I think you are the most beautiful person I have ever met. I cannot rid myself of the image of you in your Kashi home. Everything else was so poor and you like the loveliest jewel in the richest temple treasury, and so fine that you shone upon the meanness around you and made it rich.

I ask you to try to understand me. I want you to know what my feelings are. Please believe me, I am being utterly sincere. I feel so helpless about it all, and I want you to help me. Please, Videhi, be kind to me and listen to me. We know so little about each other. All my life I shall never fathom your depths or reach an end to the wonderment. Love is not easy. It is painful, especially when one is lonely and ignorant. I could cry for my need of you. I am not ashamed to show myself helpless before you. And I am bold enough to try to describe myself for you, for love gives me courage. Did I not love you I would not write these things.

I am ambitious, I want to do things. I want to win fame for myself in India and for India. I know I have not the talents or the ability to do it in any creative artistic way. My mind is limited to the practical, and I know I have the intellectual powers and will necessary to build new conditions in our country. And I want to do all this not by rebelling against the past or rejecting as unfit for the modern world our Hindu ideals, but by working from them, accepting them, and using them as a firm foundation. And in you I find the personification of that possibility. I feel that with you I can achieve all that I want so much.

I do not want to dwell on ideas like that. They are true and they are a part of me. What I want is to make clear and insistent my need for you because of my love, and within that need to claim, to beg, a greater confidence from you.

I fear that I have been blunt and harsh, and I am afraid that you will laugh at my dreams and tell me all young men have them, and I am afraid you will say my love is a fiction that I have invented to comfort

myself. Perhaps it is all true, Videhi, but I do not believe it myself, for I know that there is only one Videhi in the world. That is more certain to me than anything else in the world, and this Videhi I love with whatever words you like to use. Dear Videhi, if only you knew how sweet it was for me to write your name and to say your name you would understand that I love you.

If I have offended you, I am sorry. Life and the stars that control life, and the fate within ourselves and our souls that move the stars, have drawn us together. They have given me a jewel, a flower from heaven, a goddess; they have given you not only a husband, but a lover, a worshipper, and an adorer, and his name is

Kalyan.'

Videhi folded up the letter. Her mind was dumb and then it burst out into protest. What right had he to thrust his love upon her? How dare he demand such confidences? Then she thought, he has every right. He is going to be my husband. There is nothing wrong in the letter. It is simple, sincere, honest. I don't know how he can be so sure, but I believe him when he says he is sure. But there is no answer in me, no echo to his feelings, only a chill fear. She read the letter again. How could it be true? How could he love her? He has read many books, and love in words is clearer and stronger than love in life or action. Then what do I know of love except words? All the love stories of the world are words. What can I say to him? She was very upset and would have liked not to write at all, but she realised the best thing to do was to write promptly what she herself honestly felt. This, however, she did not find easy. Finally she wrote:

‘My dear cousin,

I have read your long letter very carefully. There will be time enough later for us to get to know each other. I would like you not to write to me any more letters like your last. I cannot answer such letters, only acknowledge them. If I tell you they distress me it should be enough. I am willing to obey my parents and I am ready to respect your feelings in every way, but I cannot force or declare my own when I am still uncertain what they are.

Your affectionate cousin,

Videhi.’

Four weeks remained to the wedding ceremonies, and they passed for Videhi rapidly and meaninglessly. She had to do so many things and she accepted them quietly. On the eve of the wedding there was music throughout the night, the steady beating of the tabla and the shrill piping of the flute. She felt the rhythmic beat of the drum, so continuous, so powerful and so inevitable was the surge of life’s forces upon her. The thin wail of the flute was like the cry of her own soul protesting but never winning the battle.

The visitors had come. Kalyan’s party had arrived. She had not seen Kalyan again, nor had he written since her letter. Throughout the day there would be parties, crowds, all relatives and friends, all chattering and joking together, exchanging gossip, admiring saris, criticising the arrangements, a continual hubbub of noise. It would go on and on. And she would have to sit still in her bridal sari, silent, modest, lonely, whilst the old Sanskrit verses were intoned. In the end she and Kalyan would hold hands, and they would walk round the sacred fire. At the heart of the ceremony was this old Vedic ritual, simple and lovely in itself and full of deep meaning,

but all around was the noise and the chatter of the common crowd. It was an ordeal in which she and Kalyan alone were the sufferers. She felt that perhaps it was not the worst ordeal, but only the beginning. Still, she had accepted it and she must endure it, and silently, passively, with the age-old strength of Indian womanhood she performed her part.

Ganesh was intoxicated with excitement. The wedding was magnificent. Rampande was equally pleased. They both felt they had accomplished a great event. Nothing inauspicious had occurred. Every arrangement had been perfect. How good it was to meet so many old friends again and renew their acquaintance! How good it was to feel that all these people present were related and friendly and a source of strength to each other. What wisdom and beauty there was in the old Hindu ways. Videhi's sisters were equally delighted. They had never been so spoilt and petted before. They felt so proud of Videhi as they saw her sitting modestly in a rich mauve Marathi sari, and waiting patiently. They felt proud of Kalyan. He looked handsome in his white clothes, and so fresh and happy. And at the end they had so many garlands around them. The sisters, too, were photographed together with Videhi. They knew the photograph would be good. It must be good. Shalini and Lakshmi were also happy. They saw their children united in what promised to be so happy an alliance. They were both fitted for each other, beautiful in youth and with all the promise of a rich, unclouded life ahead. The two mothers both cried with tears of joy and pride. Shalini thought, it has been worth it, all the long years of pain, all the long years of poverty, all the hoping and the striving and the work, all worth it many times over.

The guests, too, were jubilant. Never had they seen so

beautiful a bride. How lucky Kalyan was! Never had they seen so handsome and clever a bridegroom! How lucky Videhi was! And the parents—they congratulated them repeatedly—such success—such joy—such an auspicious occasion—it would enrich everyone.

Even to all this, quietness came as an end. The guests departed: some to stay still in Kashi, for it was not every day that they came to the holy city, others to return to their homes at once. Kalyan and his party were to return to Poona in three days. For those three days Videhi would stay still with her mother to rest, now no longer a daughter, but a married daughter. That night Videhi sank to sleep and slept deeply, grateful and yearning for the protecting dark. She had no thoughts, no fears, no wishes, only for sleep and rest and silence. All three were granted to her in the hot Kashi night, and even with the dawn and its brightness she was still asleep. Only the noise of her sisters getting up and talking woke her.

She went to the house. Already the light outside was harsh and glaring. It was going to be another extremely hot day with the sky like a brazen basin overhead, and inside an intense stillness. Shalini was in the kitchen, and she called to Videhi.

‘Do you feel rested now?’

Videhi remembered her tiredness, and the physical strain of the last few days, and the marriage. When she woke at first she had forgotten the marriage.

‘These three days are mine, aren’t they, Shalini?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ said Shalini, ‘but Kalyan will want to go out with you in the evenings when it is cool. You must ask him what he wants.’

‘I will say goodbye to Kashi in these three days,’ said Videhi, and within herself she thought of all that Kashi

meant to her. The river, holy Ganges, so massive, proud and strong, sweeping past the city and cleansing it: beautiful by night and by day: in the monsoon dangerous, spreading into the city streets and across the green fields, indifferent to the life it took. She had dreamed once of travelling in a boat from its source near Haridwar past Kashi, past Patna, through Bengal out into the open sea. That would never be now, but the vision of the dream would remain with her. Then the gardens in Kashi, rich in trees and flowers, and the veil of night that never failed to cover the city in beauty. She thought of the laughing crowds at the times of the melas, and her school and home. So little and yet so much had been done there. During these three days she would fill the cup of memory to the brim, and drain the sweetness slowly, drop by drop. She would collect all the happy images of her life in Kashi and make them clearer and fix them permanently in her memory. Not only the place, but the people, her sisters, her mother and father and her friends. Somehow she must crowd their company into these three days, and collect strength from their happiness and affection to be able to endure the immediate loneliness that would face her in Poona.

They were not, however, helpful in enabling her to satisfy her mood. She wanted to look into the past, into the home life that had existed before her marriage came. They wanted to talk about Poona, about Kalyan's house, about the servants they might have, the things that would be done in Poona. She listened to their talk.

'You must write us long letters,' said Shubha, 'and you must describe everything in detail, what you see and do. And you must tell us about the shops in Poona, and what the girls there wear. You won't forget us, will you, Videhi?'

Kalyan came in.

'Mother and Father have gone to the temple,' he said.
'I thought I would call in to see how you were.'

'Come in,' said Shalini, 'and we will make you some coffee.'

'Please don't bother, I don't want to disturb you,' said Kalyan.

Shalini told the children to go away and leave Videhi alone with Kalyan.

'It is so hot, Shalini,' said Videhi. 'Where can they go?'

'There is plenty of shade in the garden,' said Shalini.

Kalyan asked Videhi how she felt.

'I am quite well,' she said.

'Are you still reading?' he went on.

'No,' answered Videhi, 'I stopped some days ago.'

'Did you like the books?'

'Yes,' she said.

Kalyan hesitated. He did not quite know what to say. Videhi would not talk of her own accord. He wanted to talk about his letter, but felt too shy, and he knew that though the children had been sent away they or other people might come in any minute.

'Where is your father?' he asked, after an uncomfortable silence.

'He has gone to the bazaar,' said Videhi.

There was another silence.

'Is there any good film on in Kashi?' he asked again.

'I don't know,' said Videhi.

'Would you and your sisters like to go if there is?' he went on.

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'my sisters would love to go, but you will have to ask my mother if they may.'

'I'll go and find out if there is a suitable film,' said Kalyan, and he went away.

He came back soon. Videhi had gone to Shalini in the kitchen.

'It will be a good film,' he said. 'May I take the children?'

'Yes,' said Shalini, 'they will be very happy to go.'

'We'll be ready at six,' said Videhi, 'if you can call for us then.'

Kalyan understood it was a dismissal, and in the circumstances there seemed no answer, so he wished them goodbye and left.

'Why is it so hard to talk?' said Videhi to Shalini.

'That will come,' said Shalini. 'There is nothing to worry about. It is better to begin slowly and gently. You will both learn.'

'Tell me about yourself, Mother,' said Videhi. 'How did you feel?'

Shalini could see the loneliness and shyness of Videhi asking for comfort and help, and she wanted to help her, but she had no ready answer.

'What can I tell you, child?' answered Shalini gently.

'I am no longer a child,' said Videhi, 'I am a married woman.'

Shalini was going to reply when the other children burst in.

'Where's Kalyan?' they said. 'Has he gone?'

'Later,' said Shalini to Videhi, and to the children, 'if you are good he will take you to the cinema tonight.'

The girls were excited and chattered away. The hot afternoon passed and the evening came. In the company of her sisters Videhi did not mind the outing with Kalyan. The film made no impression upon her, but her sisters were delighted, and she was happy that they were happy. That night again she had deep untroubled sleep.

In the morning Kalyan came again, but Ganesh was present, and the two men talked about news in the papers, about books, about the film Kalyan had seen the

previous night. Videhi sat silent and refused to contribute to the conversation. Kalyan asked about the evening.

• 'I have to visit some school-friends in Kashi,' said Videhi, 'to whom I must say goodbye.'

'You will have to wait until Poona,' said Ganesh, laughing, to Kalyan, 'before you are alone with Videhi.'

'I must help Shalini now,' said Videhi, and she left the room full of anger at her father's remark, and unreasonably at Kalyan for listening to it.

The last day came. Shalini packed her clothes and books and Videhi stood by watching. It was going to be a busy day. The whole family and Kalyan with his mother and father were going out to lunch at the house of a Marathi friend, and Videhi felt that she would again be on view. In the evening Kalyan, with Rampande and Lakshmi, would dine at their house. Shalini and Videhi would spend most of the afternoon preparing the meal. Then night would fall and she wondered if ever again she would welcome it. Shalini had not as yet spoken to Videhi as she had promised. It was not easy to find the means and the occasion for a quiet talk in so small a house with so many occupants, and Shalini was at a loss what to say. She felt herself that only time and experience could help Videhi, but she promised herself that at night before they went to bed she would find some words of comfort and love for her daughter. It was a hard day for Videhi. The lunch was long and tedious and the conversation embarrassing to the young people. Going outside in the midday glare had given her a headache, and it persisted. Nor did the afternoon's work in the kitchen or the slightly formal evening meal help it. The older people were quiet and tired. They, too, were feeling the strain of the last few days. They were glad that it had come to an end. When the guests

had gone Shalini remembered her promise, but she saw that Videhi was tired out and weary.

‘Go to bed, Videhi,’ she said, ‘and rest.’

She kissed her daughter. It had been years since she kissed Videhi, and the intimate physical affection brought tears to Videhi’s eyes.

‘There is nothing to fear,’ said Shalini. ‘Sleep and be well.’

The train left early and everyone was up betimes, with so much to do that there was no pause for rest or thought. Videhi was in the train at the station and Shalini and Ganesh and her sisters and brother were on the platform. Shalini was weeping. As Videhi looked out of the compartment window that was the last she saw of Shalini, her mother weeping.

‘It is always like that,’ said Lakshmi. ‘Women have all the tears and the partings.’

Videhi kept close to Lakshmi.

On and on went the train through the day into the night, and through the night into the dawn, and soon after dawn into Bombay. At Bombay they changed stations and got on to the *Deccan Queen*, very comfortable, very fast, and very modern.

‘Soon now,’ said Lakshmi, ‘we will be home, and then we can all rest.’

Videhi said nothing, but she was glad Lakshmi was there. She wondered what Shalini was thinking now. She could close her eyes and imagine them all at home, but always she saw herself present, and she realised she could not imagine what Kashi would be like without herself. She realised also that Shalini might have needed some comfort, and she had said nothing to her mother but thought only of herself.

‘I will write to her at once from Poona as soon as we are there,’ she told herself.

Poona came. At the station there were orderlies waiting to greet Rampande. His car was present. It was a handsome American one and looked luxurious. The ladies got in, and the luggage was loaded on at the back, but there was too much, so Rampande asked one of his servants to bring it along separately. He sat at the front, and Kalyan, Lakshmi and Videhi at the back. It was the first time she had been so physically close to Kalyan.

They were passing now through the cantonment area with each house well set in a large garden. It all looked clean and neat. The car drove into one of the compounds and stopped inside a large spacious porchway. It was a big bungalow built in the European fashion. The rooms were large and airy, and the furniture elegant and modern. Lakshmi took Videhi and showed her the rooms, the main lounge, the study, furnished with books that belonged to Rampande, the dining-room, and the bedrooms. There were three of these: one for Lakshmi and Rampande, one for visitors, and one for Kalyan and herself. The kitchen and the servants' quarters were separate, a short way from the back of the house. All around the four sides was a wide veranda.

'I am sure you will like this place,' said Lakshmi. 'We will get your things unpacked after lunch. Meanwhile, we will bathe. Your bedroom has a separate bathroom.'

Videhi sat down on the edge of a bed. There were two single beds in the room, each fitted with neat wooden mosquito-net frames. The furniture was modern and highly polished. The floor was of stone and had some coloured straw mats on it. On the dressing-table was a large photo of Kalyan. Just then Kalyan came in.

'I hope you will be happy here, Videhi,' he said. 'I know you will feel lonely at first. Everybody will help you.'

'Yes,' said Videhi.

Kalyan went on:

'Perhaps you would like to bathe and change first. Everything is here. Shall I open your trunks for you?'

'I can manage,' said Videhi.

'It is too heavy for you,' said Kalyan.

'No,' said Videhi, 'I can manage.'

She took out her keys from her handbag and unlocked one of the boxes, and opened it to take out a change of clothing. She hesitated and said, 'I shall be ready in a very short time.'

She felt shy of touching her clothes in the presence of Kalyan.

'Will you wait outside for me, please?'

Kalyan said yes and went out; he, too, felt awkward. Videhi took out a fresh skirt and blouse and bodice and sari and a towel, and went into the bathroom.

She finished quickly and put her travel clothes on a chair. Then she sat down to do her hair. Kalyan came to the doorway. He had been waiting on the veranda.

'May I come in now?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Videhi, and went on intently with her hair.

Then she heard Kalyan go into the bathroom and she relaxed for a moment. As soon as she had done her hair she put on her tika, and went to find Lakshmi, whom she heard talking to the servants.

'Can I help you?' she said.

'There is nothing to do,' said Lakshmi. 'It is all nearly ready. Is Kalyan dressed yet?'

'I think so,' said Videhi.

'That is a nice sari you have on,' said Lakshmi, 'but I don't think that the blouse matches very well.'

'I just took the first I saw,' said Videhi. 'I did not want to delay.'

'There is no hurry,' said Lakshmi. 'Come with me. I'll show you some photographs of Kalyan while we wait

for the men.' And she produced a large album of photos of Kalyan from childhood onwards.

'Have you got one of these at home?' asked Lakshmi. 'I did not see it.'

'No,' answered Videhi. 'There are a few photographs of us, but we did not have many taken.'

After lunch Lakshmi said they should all rest. She and Rampande went to their room.

'Shall we also go?' said Kalyan.

'I suppose so,' said Videhi.

'There is no need to,' said Kalyan. 'We can stay here and talk if you prefer it.'

'You are being very kind,' said Videhi. 'I think I would sooner stay here.'

'You read my letter?' said Kalyan. 'Please forgive me for writing it to you, but I had to.'

'There is nothing to forgive,' said Videhi.

'You must believe me,' said Kalyan. 'What I said was true. I could have written much more. I could have written such letters every day. I still want to tell you I love you, Videhi. Do you still think it wrong of me to say that?'

'It cannot be wrong if it is true for you,' said Videhi.

'I want it to be true for you, too. I want so much to feel that you are happy. You have been so quiet, so reserved, and you have said nothing yet. It hurts me, Videhi.'

'I am sorry for that,' said Videhi.

'I do not mean your quietness, I mean the love I feel. I never knew that love could be so painful. All I want is some kindness instead of this indifference.'

'There is no indifference,' said Videhi. 'You forget that I may feel pain.'

'I know that,' said Kalyan. 'That is because you have just left home and you are new here, but you are not

amidst strangers. My mother loves you, and I love you. We want only to help you.'

'You are not asking that, you are not asking how you can help me,' said Videhi. 'You want me to tell you my feelings, and you want my feelings to echo yours. All I know is that my feelings are not like yours. I cannot say what they are at all. I do not know. And that to me is cause of pain as much as what you call my loneliness.'

'I'll do whatever you want, Videhi, to make you happy,' said Kalyan.

'I have to trust you for that,' said Videhi. 'I know you are sincere. I do not doubt you. There should not be any strain between us. Let us not talk about love yet, let us wait a little. I want you to wait a little, Kalyan, before you try to love me.'

'How can I wait?' cried Kalyan. 'In a few weeks I shall go to England. I may be there two years, three years. Even if I come home in the summer it is a terribly long time, and for all I know you may treat the letters I write from England as you treated those I wrote to you in Kashi. What can I do during all those long months of loneliness? I shall be more lonely there than you are here.'

'You will have your work and studies,' said Videhi.

'They will not help me to forget. I don't want to forget. I want to remember. I want to have something sweet to remember. I want to have your love to remember. I want to feel certain of you, to know that you are mine just as much as I am yours.'

Videhi said nothing. She felt suddenly that she was being drawn into an emotional crisis for which she was quite unprepared and to which she had contributed nothing. It was not hers. She refused to let it be hers. It was unfair of Kalyan to say what he had said. She had accepted the marriage. She had borne, she knew,

with dignity and restraint, all the stresses of the last few months, and now it appeared that ever-widening circles of difficulty were opening themselves around her. She felt sorry for Kalyan, but she was beginning to be more sorry for herself. Any half-wish she may have had to help Kalyan was stifled in the stronger desire to protect herself.

'There is nothing I can say just now,' said Videhi after a silence. 'Give me more time. Let us do something else other than talk. It will only hurt you.'

'You have seen the family album?' said Kalyan.

'Yes,' said Videhi.

'Then I'll show you my books. You will have to come to our room for that. You need not be afraid. I shall only talk about books.'

He spoke angrily and with bitterness.

After tea they played some gramophone records, and in the cool of the evening they walked about in the garden. Kalyan was angry all the time. His pride was hurt. If he had anything to say he was sarcastic. He was deliberately rudely impersonal in his approach to Videhi. With the dark came dinner and then time for bed. Quietly Videhi and Kalyan went to their room.

'I am sorry I have been so angry,' he said to Videhi.

She did not reply.

'Please say you forgive me, Videhi.'

She was still silent.

'I want you to call me Kalyan, please, Videhi,' he went on. 'You have never called me by my name yet.'

'I must change my sari,' said Videhi, for she was wearing a heavy silk one and she wanted to sleep in a light cotton one, and she went into the bathroom to change. When she came out Kalyan was still standing in the same spot.

'Videhi,' he said, 'please listen to me. This is the first

time we have been really alone. I love you, Videhi, and you are my wife. You must let me touch you.'

He put his hand on her arm and held her closely. She tensed her body and twisted her head, struggling against his grasp. He was surprised at the physical strength of her resistance and resentment and let her go.

'You must not do that, Kalyan,' she said.

'You are my wife, Videhi.'

'I know that,' she cried. 'Do you think I don't know that? You told me this afternoon that you loved me and did not want to hurt me. If your words mean anything, I don't want you to do that.'

'When I said I loved you I meant it,' said Kalyan, 'but loving means wanting and holding and kissing.'

'It does not mean all that against one's will,' said Videhi. 'I cannot accept that, and I know that you don't accept it either. You must not touch me, Kalyan, without my wanting.'

'At least you have learnt my name,' said Kalyan, 'and because I love you I will do what you want, but for how long I cannot say. I am not just your husband, Videhi, claiming you as my wife, but I am your lover. I am desperate and sick with love for you. I will do what you want as long as I can. I will not touch you again tonight, Videhi. You will be quite safe. Finish your hair and get into bed. I will put out the lights.'

Videhi sat down and undid her hair, brushing it slowly and plaiting it into two loose plaits for the night. Kalyan stood staring at her loveliness, and wondered how so much beauty could be, that it was so close and yet still beyond his grasp. When he thought over what he had said he felt sudden sickness of shame and anger at himself for offending her. He watched her get into bed, and tuck in the mosquito net, and draw the thin white sheet over herself.

‘I shall leave the fan on,’ he said. ‘It will be hot to-night. I’ll turn the lights off now. Good night, Videhi.’

‘Good night,’ answered Videhi.

Neither slept much, each in their beds lying still and thinking: Kalyan miserable and unhappy, wondering how his longing could be satisfied, how he could make Videhi want him as he wanted her; and Videhi nervous and fearful, wondering to what she had to trust, and to what end all this could come. In the darkness there was only the fan whirring overhead slowly throughout the night.

The next day passed rapidly. Lakshmi took her out to some of the fine Poona shops in the morning, and in the evening they all drove out in the car, and Lakshmi told Videhi how lovely the west coast was, and how after the monsoons were over they would go there and watch the great breakers of the Indian Ocean burst on the long stretches of sand, and they would picnic in the shade of the palm trees. The drive to the coast was magnificent, every turn in the road breaking open some forest-clad valley, and on the hilltops still visible the ruins of old Maratha forts.

Videhi was not listening. Throughout the day she had been only half aware of what was going on around her. She felt she could not continue in this state. She knew that Lakshmi was kind and would help her, and she felt that Kalyan, though at present unhappy, was also like his mother, kind. She had seen enough in her few hours at Poona to know at what high level of comfort they lived. From every material consideration her marriage promised well, if only, and that was the point, if only she could forget herself and accept Kalyan’s love. Had he not loved her, she thought, in one of those half-circles of thought by which the mind and will seek to escape, she might have accepted him and been a submissive wife. She had agreed within herself, when Shalini first spoke of marriage, to accept it and live out her life in the orthodox

way. She realised that the agreement had been made in ignorance, but she did not complain on that score. What she felt was unjustifiable, and outrageously wrong, was the insistence that she should give love because it was given to her. It was a direct attack upon her personality, a personality that the last few months had developed and matured, and an attack she felt compelled to defend herself against. Whatever has happened so far is not my responsibility, she told herself, nor will I say whether it is right or wrong. I know that if I continue to live with this man I do not love I shall be doing wrong to myself and to him.

That evening after dinner she and Kalyan were alone within their room.

‘I want to talk to you, Videhi,’ he said. ‘I promise I won’t touch you and you must promise to listen to me.’

‘I am listening,’ said Videhi.

‘I have been thinking ever since last night,’ said Kalyan. ‘In fact, I have been thinking ever since I met you. It is like a disease that has grown on me, this love, only a disease I welcome. I will be gentle and patient with you, Videhi, but I want you also to be kind to me. I need you so much, Videhi. When I met you and later realised I was to marry you, I thought myself the happiest man alive. Now I am married to you, and you seem farther away than ever. I want to ask—I know I do not expect you to answer me, but you can answer yourself. It is not easy for me to find words, but I want to ask you to be bold enough to forget, at least when we are alone, the shyness. I want you to be brave, for I am so afraid of the time that is flying and robbing us of each day’s happiness, and I am afraid, too, lest all my longing grow too strong and I try to love you and hurt you, as you said, against your will. I tremble at myself, Videhi. Promise me you will be brave, please. Promise me you will try to help me?’

'If I can help you I will,' said Videhi.

In bed she did not sleep.

He had asked me to be brave, she thought, as if I needed that challenge, but perhaps I do need it. If he trembles, I tremble. I just cannot bear the thought of closer life with him. He wants to love me, and then go away content. If I give in I will always give in. I cannot bear that either, that time and habit should wear me down, as I am sure it would. I am ready to endure much, but not the shame of loving without love, not the loss of my pride in physical humiliation. I cannot see love coming. What can change me in the next few days? How can it happen that I will suddenly feel that it is welcome or tolerable? Nor can I wait for that to come. What would I do whilst waiting? What would we do together? No, a future together is impossible. I see that now. I know all that I have done so far is wrong. Better end that wrong at once rather than add to it. Better for me, perhaps better for Kalyan, but certainly better for me. I shall leave Poona. I shall go back to Shalini. However much they blame me, I do not care.

And with the resolve she slept deeply and at ease.

Next morning she got up firm and determined. She had enough money in her bag to pay the fare to Kashi, but she would not be able to take any of her things with her, for she would have to slip out unobserved, her purpose unsuspected. It was herself she wanted to save, not her things. Even slipping out would be difficult, for it was not usual for a young girl to go out alone. She would tell Lakshmi, however, that she was going to the shops with Kalyan, and would get a tonga to the station. She felt nervous of the long journey in front of her alone, but there was no other way.

I'll write a note to Kalyan, she said to herself, and leave it under his pillow.

She wrote:

‘My dear Kalyan,

I am leaving you. I shall not return. You will be very angry and upset with me now, I know, and so will everybody. It is not easily that I cause all this trouble. And probably only you will understand why, that I cannot live with you unless I love you, and there is no love, only sympathy, sorrow and regret.

Show your mother this letter.

Videhi.’

Chapter Eleven

THROUGHOUT the long journey from Delhi to Kashi she had been nervous of the meeting with Shalini and Ganesh and of the hurt she was to cause them, but now that the old familiar landmarks were in sight she felt only a sense of relief and friendship. How good it was to be amongst the old well-known places and so near her friends. Would they be her friends any more? She did not care, she told herself. I have come back to where I belong and where I can be free. She got into a tonga at the station and was soon at home. Luckily, there was no-one about when she got off, and she slipped quickly into the house. Nothing had changed. How foolish, she thought. It is only a few days since I left—why should anything change? Yet it seems as though my whole life has changed, and so long since I was away.

‘Shalini,’ she called. ‘Shalini, I have come back.’

Her mother came to the front room. She was looking grey and worried and there was a tiredness in her eyes.

'I am so glad to see you, Videhi,' she said. 'We had a telegram from Poona that you had left, and we did not understand why or where you had gone. We were so nervous of you travelling alone, and perhaps lost. At least we know you are safe. You must rest now and tell us later. Ganesh is very upset. He is out now.'

'I don't want to rest, Shalini, now that I am back home. I am happy and glad and feel rested already, and there is nothing to tell.'

'I wish it was so simple as that,' said Shalini, 'but it is not, it is only a beginning. I have not slept since the telegram came.'

She sat down and cried unrestrainedly. Videhi was moved to see her mother unhappy.

'Why do you cry, Mother?' she asked. 'Please don't cry. I am sorry I have hurt you. I did not want to.'

'There is no hurt,' said Shalini, 'no hurt; people never do want to hurt, but it comes all the same. Sorrow is the salt of our blood, inescapable, always present. You do not know what you have done. Ganesh is bitter, your sisters are sad and silent, and I am miserable, utterly miserable, and yet I am glad you are back, glad you are alive.'

Just then Ganesh came in. He stopped when he saw Videhi.

'So you have returned,' he said, 'and brought our efforts to mockery. I never thought that you, Videhi, would bring your mother such pain. However, I shall send a telegram to Poona now, and say that you are here, and will return shortly.'

'I have come to stay, Father,' said Videhi, 'not to return. I am not going back.'

'Not going back?' questioned Ganesh. 'How can you stay here? You are married now. You are Kalyan's wife. You belong to his home. You must go back.'

'I am not going back to Poona,' said Videhi.

'You are not to argue with me,' shouted Ganesh. 'You are a shameless woman, leaving your husband and your home like this. What do you think people will say? What do you think we all feel here, your mother, your sisters, myself? You have disgraced us. If you go back now at least it will be forgotten quickly, but go back you must. Anything else is unmentionable, unthinkable. We did not marry you to an old man, or a sick man, or a poor man. I cannot understand your actions. I don't want to. But go back you must.'

'Let Videhi be for a while,' said Shalini. 'She, too, must be upset. Just send a telegram to say she is here and safe. We have not heard what Videhi has to say yet.'

'I am not going to hear it,' said Ganesh. 'I am not going to discuss it with her.'

Shubha and Vasanti came in.

'Here is your sister,' cried Ganesh. 'Look at her, quite brazen and impertinent. Even your young sisters know better than you, Videhi.'

The two girls began to cry. They had never seen their father so angry before. They could not understand what Videhi had done, though they knew it must be something very wrong to upset their parents so.

'I will not speak to you again,' said Ganesh, 'until you come to your senses and say you will return to Poona.'

He went out to send off the telegram and came back in a few minutes. He ignored Videhi. Shalini said, 'There is always work to do. We will talk later. Help me now with the meal, Videhi.'

Videhi was glad to do something. Shalini did not talk, and the children were quiet. Only Vishnu seemed happy to see Videhi back.

'I missed you so much, Videhi,' he said. 'No-one will tell me stories like you.'

The meal was silent, uncomfortable. Ganesh did not speak. Nor did Shalini. After it was over Ganesh went out into the front room.

‘Stay here with me,’ said Shalini to Videhi. ‘I will send the children into the garden.’

She sat down on the stone floor of the kitchen and Videhi sat near her, and then put her head into her mother’s lap and cried and cried. Shalini smoothed her hair.

‘Tell me what it is?’ she said.

‘How can I tell you, Mother?’ said Videhi between her sobs. ‘There is so little to tell. They were all very kind to me at Poona, only I could not bear to be close or alone with Kalyan. He said he loved me. He wanted me to love him. I don’t love him. I know I shall never love him. I’ll never love anyone. I felt I could not stay with him. I had to escape.’

‘My dear,’ said Shalini, ‘it is nothing. Your father is upset. You must not take any notice of his anger. He is a man and does not always understand what a young girl feels. It has happened before. Young wives have run away from their husbands in a kind of terror. They’ve gone back, Videhi, and been happy. One has to get used to marriage and one has to get used to love.’

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘it is not love where one has to get used to it. I can understand love being hard even for lovers, but where there is no love it is impossible.’

‘You are very young still,’ said Shalini, ‘and you have had a shock. It is my fault. I should have prepared you more.’

‘No, no,’ said Videhi. ‘There is no preparation. You do not understand, Shalini. You did not have to marry a stranger.’

‘My dear, how can you call Kalyan a stranger? You

had met him, he wrote to you, he seemed very kind and gentle.'

'I hate him,' said Videhi shortly and suddenly. 'He seemed to think that because he loved me it gave him rights over me.'

'He is your husband,' said Shalini.

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'and I am his wife and will always be his wife, but I am myself first. I will not live with him.'

'We won't argue now,' said Shalini. 'You are too upset to think and we are too upset to listen.'

The house was strained and silent. Ganesh was dark and aloof. The sisters were cowed and unhappy. Shalini said they should all go to bed early. They were sleeping outside, all the beds with their white mosquito nets in a line. The sky was cloudless and lit with stars.

What do they think of us, thought Videhi, and what do we think of them? Because they are so beautiful and so far away we admire them, and I think we envy them their impenetrable loneliness, and the coldness with which they shine so perfectly.

Thinking of them she fell asleep. Shalini also slept quickly. The sickening worry she had known since the telegram came was ended. Videhi was back and safe. She was confident she could persuade her to return. She was not angry with Ganesh for being so angry himself, nor was she worried at the quietness and unhappiness of her other daughters. It will all help, she thought, to convince Videhi that what she has done is wrong, and somehow I will make it easy for her to return. Next morning brought a telegram and two letters. The telegram was from Rampande and was addressed to Ganesh. It read: 'Please arrange to bring back Videhi at once.' He also received a letter from Rampande. This must have been written the day Videhi left Poona. It was short. He wrote:

'My dear Ganesh,

I need not tell you how shocked and hurt we were to discover that Videhi had left us. We have given her every kindness and can imagine no reason for her running away, except the foolish fears of a young girl. We had thought Videhi serious, loyal and obedient. She must come back at once before any gossip spreads. It is not fitting for us who have done so much for her to fetch her. I expect you to bring her back. We will welcome her without reproach. But she must come at once.

**Your very grieved cousin,
Rampande.'**

Ganesh read it and then read it out aloud.

'See how generous he is,' he said to Shalini. 'They will welcome Videhi without reproach.'

He did not speak to Videhi. He said to Shalini, 'You must find out from Videhi when she is ready to go, and I will take her to Poona. We have missed the morning train, but there is one at midday that we can catch.'

The other letter was to Videhi and it was from Kalyan. He wrote:

'My dearest Videhi,

I never thought there could be so much hurt in life as when I discovered your note to me, and found you missing from our home. Nor did I think that I could ever love you more than I have done so far, but when I realised you had gone, it seemed that not only was my longing for you, Videhi, doubled but my love increased many times and even greater in strength. I love you, Videhi. I want you back. Please come back to me. I reproach myself bitterly for anything I have said or done to hurt you. If only you will come back

to me I will be good to you. I will do what you want, whatever it is, only come back to me. My home is empty now and my mother and father are desolate, but it is not of them that I think, but of you, Videhi, leaving me because of my harshness. I do not know what else to say to you, Videhi, only to beg of you to return to me. Please come back, Videhi. If you come I will ask my father to let you come with me to England and we will not be parted ever, and we will live a new life out there alone. Please, Videhi, answer me.

Kalyan.'

'Well,' said Ganesh to Shalini, 'has Videhi made up her mind yet?'

'My mind was made up, Father, when I left Poona,' said Videhi.

'I will speak again to her,' said Shalini.

She called Videhi to come into the garden.

'Sit with me here in the shade,' she said, 'and talk to me and listen to me.'

She plucked a jasmin bud. .

'See how sweet this flower is, so rich the perfume, so white and closed the petals. How easy it is to pluck it and crush it and destroy it, so that it will never open and unfold. That is what you are doing to your life, Videhi. You are on the point of destroying it, but there is still time. Can't you see your father's anger, your sister's silence, my own grief? We love you, Videhi, and you are not afraid of us. We would not wish you harm. We all want you to go back to Kalyan. It is right and proper. You have a duty to him as well as to us. Your fear of him is a very passing thing. You are just learning what it is to cease to be a girl and to be a woman. To be married and to become a mother, Videhi, is a great gift, and, like

all great gifts, it is not easily won. There is nothing easy in this life, nothing without some pain.'

'I know that, Shalini,' said Videhi, 'but it is possible to live without shame. I don't mind the pain of it or the difficulty, but not the shame of it.'

'Even that we must endure sometimes,' said Shalini. 'Do you think I have not endured shame?'

'If you have, then it has been for something you loved, for your children perhaps. You are asking me to endure it for nothing.'

'Not for nothing,' said Shalini. 'Your mother and father are not nothing, your sisters are not nothing, your husband is not nothing, the faith and custom you have been brought up in is not nothing, nor your own self-respect, nor the promises you made in accepting the marriage. You are my daughter, Videhi, and I have a right to ask you to be loyal.'

'When I was your daughter,' said Videhi, 'I believed you and obeyed you. I am still your daughter, but I am also married, and if that marriage has brought me great distress it has also brought me strength. I have learnt to be independent. I have paid a bitter price for it. I would rather it had not been, but there is no turning back. You cannot persuade me, Shalini. I know it would be wrong for me to go back to Kalyan. I will not go back.'

'Have you at least no consideration for me?' said Shalini. 'What you have done hurts me most of all. Your life and your future has been my support throughout all these years. If you fail me, then all that has gone, and I shall have failed indeed.'

'I am sorry, Mother,' said Videhi. 'We are only hurting each other by continuing to talk about it.'

'What can I do, Videhi? What can I do?' asked Shalini piteously.

Videhi turned to go. She felt deeply her mother's hurt, and her own sense of guilt as cause of it was acute. Ganesh came to the garden to call Shalini. One of the neighbours had come.

'I'll be there,' said Shalini.

Videhi stayed where she was. She could not face the inquisitive gaze of people in the compound just yet. Shalini went to her friend.

'I hear Videhi has come back,' she said.

'Yes,' answered Shalini.

Nothing more was said. It was quite clear that Shalini was in great distress, and Ganesh looked very glum and angry. Something had gone wrong with the marriage already. It would come out in a few days. She went away.

'Now everyone will know,' said Ganesh, 'everyone will talk. Our name is ruined. Has Videhi come to her senses yet?'

'She will not go back,' said Shalini. 'It is no use talking, the thing is finished.'

'She must,' said Ganesh.

'We cannot make her go,' said Shalini.

'We can,' said Ganesh. 'I will send a telegram to Kalyan and ask him to come here to talk to her.'

'Kalyan is the one person she will not talk to,' said Shalini.

'She shall not stay under my roof then,' said Ganesh, 'if she does not go. I will not keep her here.'

'You cannot say that, Ganesh. You know you do not mean it. We cannot turn our daughter away.'

'I will tell her that,' said Ganesh, and he called Videhi in from the garden.

'Your mother tells me you still refuse to go back to Poona,' said Ganesh. 'Is that true?'

'Yes,' said Videhi.

'If you refuse to go you cannot stay here,' said Ganesh. 'We do not want a disobedient daughter in the house.'

'I will leave then,' said Videhi.

'Where will you go?'

'I do not know. I will not return to Poona. If you think so badly of me, and if you say I must leave this house, I shall go, but I do not know where.'

Shalini was weeping. Videhi stood still. Vishnu came running in.

'Tell me a story, Videhi. You promised you would.'

'There is no time now, Vishnu,' said Ganesh. 'Run away and play.'

'I want my story,' repeated Vishnu. 'Videhi promised it to me.'

'Videhi has promised many things,' said Ganesh bitterly.

'Shall I go now, Father?' asked Videhi, wanting to bring all this to an end.

'No,' said Ganesh. 'You have been a faithless wife. But if you do not know how to play your part in a proper Hindu home, at least none shall say we do not know our parts. You can stay in your mother's home, and you can remind us every day of the shame you have caused us. I shall write to Rampande, but what I shall say I do not know.'

Shalini was still weeping. Videhi went to her mother.

'Please, Shalini, don't cry so.'

'Have I not cause?' said Shalini.

Videhi went out into the garden. She felt utterly helpless. She had brought back only sorrow to her home. Her mother's grief and her father's anger confused her. The harsh words that Ganesh had spoken sank deep into her mind.

What have I done to deserve that? she thought. I claimed a right and a freedom and all I have won is misery. Perhaps I should go back. To go back is to destroy myself. I would no longer be Videhi. Better destroy myself here, to walk into the holy Ganges and drown, and then there would be an end.

The thought of suicide did not really possess her. She felt she was living through the drama of those modern films that at heart she despised, and then she wondered why she despised them.

I thought it never happened like that, Videhi told herself, that the invention was cheap, but it is not cheap when you suffer it yourself.

And she stayed still and sad and brooding in the garden. In the house Shalini was bitterly unhappy. The thought that all the pain she had endured should culminate in this further pain oppressed her. It is so unfair, she told herself. Better the silence of death than all this. Then the thought of Videhi herself alone came to her. She, too, might think of death. But that would be final, a blow from which there could be no recovery. She got up and said to Ganesh:

‘You must not use any more harsh words, Ganesh. You must not tax her spirit too much. We must think of the future and of what we can do.’

‘You planned her marriage,’ said Ganesh, ‘you plan her future now.’ I wish you success, but I’ll have no part in it.’

‘You must help her, Ganesh,’ said Shalini.

‘How?’ asked Ganesh. ‘How can I help her? What can I do?’

‘Let us forget that she has been married.’

‘That is impossible,’ said Ganesh. ‘She is married, and for always.’

Shalini called Videhi in.

‘What has been done, Videhi, is finished. We won’t talk about it any more. We have your future with us, and we want to help you. I don’t know how yet, but we shall try. I shall write to the school and ask them to help us. I shall have to tell them, of course, about you. Will you mind that?’

‘No,’ said Videhi. ‘How can I mind? Everyone will know. I suppose they will blame me too.’

‘We are not going to speak about blame any more,’ said Shalini. ‘I told you that was finished. Ganesh will write to Rampande and tell him what you have told us, and he will ask for your things to be sent here.’

‘I don’t want to see them again,’ said Videhi.

‘No, I expect not, but we must have them back. We are not so rich as to be able to buy all your clothes again. You will have to endure their sight—you may have even worse things to endure than that.’

That evening Ganesh wrote a short note to Rampande. He said:

‘My dear Rampande,

What has happened has pained me beyond words. I have spoken to Videhi. Shalini has spoken to her. Neither our tears nor our remonstrances have had any effect. She persists in her mad resolve quite selfish and regardless. She will stay with us here. Shalini asks me to request you to send Videhi’s things to us. What will happen to Videhi or to her sisters I do not know. Who will marry them when Videhi’s marriage has been so inauspicious? I cannot write more.’

Videhi watched her father write. She was filled with suspense and unhappiness, but when the letter was written and put into its envelope she felt relieved, even more so when Ganesh went out at once to post it.

Meanwhile Shalini was writing to the Principal. She made several beginnings and tore them up. It was difficult to write, but at last words came.

That night they were all sleeping outside in the open. It was near the end of June. About midnight there was a violent burst of thunder, and a vivid flash of lightning that woke them all up. Repeated flashes occurred, the whole sky being lit up with a dazzling, mauve light showing the heavy racing monsoon clouds, some white, some black, all in turmoil. Hurriedly they took their beds inside; a sudden coldness, almost a chill, fell on the air; then the rain came, drenching down. Videhi stood in the doorway watching. 'Come in,' said Shalini. 'You will get wet.'

'I'm wet already, Mother. I like the rain; it is so sweet after all this heat.'

Her sari was soaked through and her hair wet. The rain stirred up the dust and filled the air with that pleasant earthy smell, the smell of the parched ground welcoming the water after so many months of heat. The lightning continued. The compound was astir with people getting in their beds, and there were lights in many rooms. Suddenly they all fused. Videhi felt it was better now with only the lightning in the sky. It was wonderful with what vivid relief it lit up the straight lines of the buildings, which glistened white and then sank into darkness when the lightning ceased. Videhi felt a sense of ease and abandon. Her body welcomed the rain just as the ground did. She was conscious of the physical joy and happiness. How good life was! How superb the scene! What violence and destruction overhead!

'Come and watch the rain and the sky, Shalini,' she said. 'It is so beautiful and alive.'

'You watch,' said Shalini. 'If I come all the children

will come. I don't want them all wet. You must dry yourself and change soon.'

'The rain will stop before long,' said Videhi. 'It is the first burst of the monsoon. Then I will come in.'

Framed against the doorway she stood, in the vivid lightning every detail clear, like the statue in a temple of a goddess with the sari faintly carved in stone, and the living flesh beneath. Shalini felt again the fresh youthfulness of Videhi and her beauty, and wondered with anguish to herself at having committed Videhi to such a world of troubles.

Videhi came in when the rain ceased and dried and changed herself. It was chilly after the rain, and she drew a sheet over herself and sank into untroubled sleep. Next day in the house the atmosphere was less tense. Ganesh still looked gloomy, but Videhi smiled, and her sisters felt they could talk and play together as in old times, and Vishnu asked again for his story.

'Shall I tell you a new one or an old one?' asked Videhi.

'A new one,' cried Vishnu, 'and about Poona.'

'No, not about Poona,' said Videhi. 'I shall tell you a story about the clouds. The clouds, you know, can talk to each other. You hear them in the monsoon. Only in the hot weather they are so distant and weak they have no voice. Once, in a monsoon during the night-time, two clouds were talking to each other.

"Do you know," said one, "the most beautiful thing in the world that I have just seen? I was passing over the Western Ghats, very high, and I could see straight down below me in the forest on the hills a village, and in the village a temple, and outside the temple a girl with an earthen jug for water on her head. She was so beautiful, I thought she must be Radha, and I was sad that

I should have to leave her after one passing glance and never be able to come back."

"Well," said the other cloud, "when I was passing over those same ghats I saw a man in a field playing on a flute just like Krishna, and also very beautiful."

"If they are not Krishna and Radha," said the first cloud, "they ought to be. Let us ask the lightning to take a message from us to Shiva, that Krishna and Radha are still in the world but separated."

"They asked the lightning to carry the message, and off in a flash the lightning sped over the plains, over the foothills, over the ice-cold white mountains to snowy summits where Shiva sat still and meditating. The lightning flashed into his eye and the message into his brain.

"Krishna and Radha left Brindaban long ago," said Shiva, "and are now in the golden isle together. Who are these mortals? I will go and see."

"He took the shape of an old man and went to the village where the girl was. He asked her for water and she gave it to him.

"What is your name, child," he said, "that I may bless you?"

"I am called Tara," said the girl.

"And your mother's name?" said Shiva.

"Manorama," answered the girl.

"Happy mother," said Shiva, "to have so beautiful a daughter."

"And he poured some of the water she had given him over her, and it fell upon her like a perfume sweeter than jasmin or champā. When she got back to her house her mother was amazed and said, "What is this, daughter?" And Tara said, "The gift and blessing of an old man to whom I gave water."

'Meanwhile Shiva went to where the young man was and found him still playing his flute.

"Who taught you to play the flute?" he asked the young man.

"No-one," was the answer. "I taught myself."

"There is a better flute player in the next village," said Shiva.

"Is there?" said the young man. "I did not know. Can he play the flute really well? Would he teach me?"

"Would you learn of him?" asked Shiva.

"Yes, willingly," answered the youth.

Shiva sprinkled some water over him, and, as before, it came like a heavenly perfume.

"Go to the next village, and where you find this perfume there you will learn to play on your flute songs that Krishna himself would have been happy to sing."

The young man went with his flute to the next village and asked each person he met, "Where is the flute player?" "There is no flute player here," was the answer each time, and they marvelled at the perfume he carried with him. He came to Tara's house and asked Manorama if the flute player lived there.

"There is no flute player here," said Manorama, and then she caught the perfume, the same that Tara had, and she asked the young man to come in.

"What is your name," she said, "and your father's name?"

"My name is Vijaya, and my father's name is Kumar," was the answer. "But," he went on, "the flute player is here, he must be here, the perfume is here. The old man told me that where I should find the perfume there I should find the player who would teach me to play as Krishna played."

He saw Tara, and she drew her sari over her head.

"Play for us," said Manorama.

'He put the flute to his lips and he played, and the sweetest music came out. He had never played so well before. The villagers heard it and came around Manorama's house. "It is Krishna himself," they said. They would not let Vijaya go, nor did he want to go. Tara held him and his music held Tara.

'So he stayed playing until the dark fell, then they all made him welcome and they asked him where he got his wonderful gift.

"Ask Tara that," he said.

'Manorama said, "It is a message from the gods. Send for your father, Vijaya, ask Kumar to come, and we will celebrate your wedding to Tara."

'The evening they were married the monsoon clouds gathered again and the sky was lit with lightning and the clouds said, "We have seen Vijaya and Tara together, and not even the lightning is so bright!" The lightning answered, "I have seen Vijaya and Tara together, and their loveliness is more welcome than rain to thirsty ground."

Videhi stopped. Vishnu and his sisters were listening spellbound. Shalini had also been listening, and she wondered at the child-like play of the little story, and how Videhi could tell it so sweetly after her recent experiences. She is still a child herself, she thought, and her heart is untouched. Openly, however, she said to Videhi, 'It is time Vishnu went to bed. You must not excite him or he will never sleep.'

'He will sleep all right, Mother,' said Videhi. 'He is a good boy.'

'Perhaps,' said Shalini, 'but I am surprised at you telling a story like that now.'

'Why is it wrong?' asked Videhi.

'Not wrong,' said Shalini, 'but the imagination can carry you away as much as Vishnu.'

Videhi questioned within herself how far her mother's veiled reproach was justified. Did it show that her imagination was too fertile, and was the fertility of her imagination a source to her of escape from reality? How far had her feelings towards Kalyan been coloured by an overwrought mind? Not at all, she answered herself. They came from something deeper than the imagination. They were an instinctive reaction. She had been in the habit of telling Vishnu and the other children stories such as these, made up on the spur of the moment, her own invention, but containing echoes or parallels from the common stock of Indian tales. Only now was Shalini objecting. Objecting, perhaps, was too strong a word. She sighed. Her mother was probably right. The time had passed for fairy-tales. Yet she felt a need for them for herself. She knew the stories pleased Vishnu, and the telling of them, and the images she used, pleased herself. She shared her brother's pleasure and her mind was one with his. I must cease, she told herself, to be a child. That is what Shalini means.

Vishnu was still persistent for a second story.

'Not tonight,' said Videhi. 'Tomorrow I will tell you one, another kind.'

That night as she lay in her bed she thought still about the stories, asking herself how far they were right or wrong, how far they were a defence for herself, and how far their romance was improper. I have no other romance, she thought. Then she told herself, nor do I need it, not now. She felt tired. The gladness and the freshness of the previous night had gone. She wondered what Lakshmi was doing; she wondered what would happen to herself; she wondered what would become of Vishnu when he grew up. Time was still very remote and slow-moving, creeping along, hardly changing, yet in

the end things changed and people changed. Would she herself ever change? Could she see herself in the future? Now it was all blank and featureless. The weariness of the unknown oppressed her, but in the end sleep came. In the morning she had forgotten her worries, and was busy in the house helping Shalini and occupied with the children. For a few days this routine continued and the household was almost at ease again. Ganesh did not speak much to Videhi, but there was no longer any harshness, and Videhi marvelled how quickly a wound seemed to heal, not realising that memory was only storing away the pain rather than obliterating it.

A letter arrived from the Principal for Shalini. It said that she would be in Kashi in a day or so and that she thought it possible to give her the help needed. She said the school had always valued Videhi highly, and would willingly assist her to a future in which she could live with independence and usefulness. She would see Shalini as soon as she came, for if they were going to do anything they would have to arrange things very quickly, as the new school year was so near. Shalini showed the letter to Videhi, and it contained so much promise for her that it made her feel embarrassed. The feeling returned that she had done great wrong to her own family, and that she was a cause of trouble to all. The memories of Poona returned and drove away the embarrassment. One pain replaced another. She thought, That is the nature of life. She asked Shalini, 'Shall I have to see the Principal?'

'You are not afraid of that, surely?' said Shalini. 'You know her well enough. She will be kind.'

'I don't want to talk about Poona.'

'There'll be no need for that. It is only your future we are concerned with now.'

When the Principal came she asked for Videhi.

'I don't want to do anything but for your good, Videhi,' she said, 'but we have got to be very quick. Term will start in a few days. If we find the means, will you agree to study further to complete your education so that you may equip yourself professionally?'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'if my mother and father will permit.'

'There is no need to say that,' said Shalini. 'We are too poor to help you much ourselves, but we will place no obstacles in your way.'

'Then,' went on the Principal, 'I feel you should not stay in Kashi. You should go somewhere else, and there are not many places possible—Delhi, Lucknow, or Allahabad. We may have to try them all to get you admitted, as time is so short. Are you prepared to leave Kashi?'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'I love Kashi, but I can leave it.'

'You would have, of course, to live in one of the girls' hostels.'

'I don't mind,' said Videhi.

'And you, Shalini?'

'I think that is what we all want,' said Shalini.

'And can you decide now what you would like to be?'

'Videhi would like to be a doctor,' said Shalini, 'but that is a long training.'

'Is it true?' asked the Principal.

'I think I would sooner be a doctor than a teacher,' said Videhi.

'You don't think much of us, do you?' said the Principal, laughing. 'Well, it is true that even with our best pupils we don't always achieve success. Still, that does not matter. I shall try to arrange things at once. And now do you think I could speak to Videhi alone, please, Shalini?'

‘Of course. I will go and make some coffee for you.’

‘My dear,’ said the Principal as soon as Shalini had left the room, ‘there are so many things I would like to say to you, but I’ll only tell you one of them. We women have so many burdens to bear, and you have been given early a great one. Don’t try to ignore it, but don’t let it embitter you. When I was young I was married like you. My husband died within a year. I thought my life had ended, but I have discovered it never ends. I was not happy during that year of marriage, and for long afterwards I used to reproach myself for having felt unhappy. Even now I sometimes wonder how far I am fit to have the charge of young girls. I wonder what life has in store for them, and I tremble each time I hear of my girls getting married. We are able to do so little to prepare them. I don’t think we can, Videhi. All we can do, and in this we often fail, is to teach them to respect greatness and to face the future with courage, and to hope that they will never lose the feelings of kindness and gentleness.’

Videhi said nothing. She was surprised that the Principal also had been once young and married and unhappy.

‘Shall I ask Shalini to bring in the coffee?’ she said after a few moments.

‘Yes,’ said the Principal, and when Shalini came in they began to talk about local gossip. Later in the evening Shalini was telling Ganesh what had happened.

‘I don’t want Videhi to leave us,’ he said. ‘I don’t like the idea of her going away from home and living in a hostel.’

‘She won’t be alone,’ said Shalini. ‘She will be with the other girls. Besides, she is grown up.’

‘I don’t like it,’ said Ganesh. ‘The house will not be the same without Videhi.’

Videhi was surprised at her father wanting her to stay. He was really quite kind and solicitous.

'Terms are not long,' said Videhi. 'I shall come home for the holidays.'

'Of course,' said Ganesh, 'but that is not the same thing. You will grow up away from us and we will lose part of you.'

Shalini said nothing. She was glad to hear Ganesh so sympathetic towards Videhi after so many days of silence and anger. She thought his present attitude typical of his character. He was really weak and hated change. He would not make a decision himself. He had opposed the idea of Videhi marrying at first, then when Shalini had made it possible he had accepted it. He had been outrageously angry with Videhi on her return from Poona; now he had accepted this also and was unwilling for her to go elsewhere. Still, what does it matter, thought Shalini, so long as he is kindly spoken? And perhaps I am wronging him. He is kind. Only years of living so close with him have made me see only the meaner side of him, and I have forgotten the better. It is I who am at fault, not Ganesh.

Next day Videhi's trunks arrived from Poona. Shalini was glad to see them. Now she could get ready and have Videhi prepared. Videhi was upset at the sight of the trunks.

'I will not take the wedding things or the fine saris,' she said. 'I don't want them.'

Shalini put them on one side.

'I will write and acknowledge their arrival,' she said. 'Do you want me to tell them what you are going to do?'

'We don't know ourselves definitely yet,' said Videhi, 'and if we did, I would still rather you did not tell them.'

'It is not easy for them in Poona either,' said Shalini. 'People will ask them about you. It is very awkward

if they have nothing to say. If they can say you are still studying at college it looks better.'

'I don't want it to look better,' said Videhi. 'You still talk as though it were a crime.'

'No,' said Shalini, 'I don't mean that at all, but I will tell them. It will not hurt you and it will help them. We have to help people even if we think they have been unkind to us. You need have no fear, Kalyan should be on his way to England soon.'

'Is that what you want to find out, Shalini?' asked Videhi.

'Perhaps it is,' answered her mother. 'Wouldn't you feel happier if you knew?'

'I never think about Kalyan,' said Videhi.

'Well, I shall find out all the same,' said Shalini. 'Sometimes, you know, you are very like your father. You have the same willpower as myself, but you are as obstinate as he is in refusing to see the necessity for being practical and acting with common sense. He lives in a world of romance and you do, too.'

Videhi blushed.

'It must be hard for you, Shalini, to have the two of us to deal with.'

'Not the two of you,' said Shalini, and she smiled at her daughter, 'the whole family of you, and myself also.'

There were still two days to go before term started and no news had yet been received of anything certain about Videhi. Ganesh was busy grumbling, as he always did at the beginning of the school year, at the timetable that had been imposed upon him. He never got a fair proportion, or the classes or the subjects he would have liked. Videhi's sisters were excited about their new classes and the new teachers they might have. Then word came about Videhi. She was to go to Delhi,

do her intermediate examination in one year and then carry on with the proper medical studies. The Principal had secured a place for Videhi in the college hostel and had arranged about her fees and expenses. They would not be great. The school would grant a scholarship for the first year and would follow it up probably at the end of it if she did well. She could also then hope for help from the Delhi college.

Videhi was happy. She had, it was true, never seriously given medicine a thought as a career. She knew she could work hard and she had always done well so far at school. She could not see far into the future, but what she could see now pleased and excited her. In one day she was to leave Kashi.

'I can easily travel alone,' she said. 'I came alone from Delhi. I have only to get on the train. There is nothing to worry about.'

'You must send us a telegram as soon as you arrive,' said Shalini, 'and you must write to us every week. There will be Marathi people in Delhi. Perhaps we may know some. Do you know anyone in Delhi, Ganesh?'

'Of course. There is Bhaskar Rao,' said Ganesh. 'He was at Poona with me. He is in the Delhi University. He is a lecturer in English. And there is Dandekar. He is in Delhi in the Imperial Secretariat. I'll write to them both. They could meet you at the station.'

'That has already been arranged,' said Videhi. 'I will be met by someone from the hostel.'

'We must pack and get everything ready,' said Shalini. 'You choose your books. There'll be no need to take them all. I will put some Marathi pickles in jars for you. I hope the food is good. Delhi is so far north. You will miss our food, Videhi.'

'And you must tell me a story tonight,' said Vishnu, 'a really long one.'

Sakuntala said, 'I will write to you every day, Videhi. I will write to you at once and you must answer.'

'And I, too,' said Vasanti.

So through the evening they were busy and almost gay. Videhi was too happy to examine her feelings, nor did she think much, if at all, about the future. Shalini was busy, too, but she was thoughtful. She was surprised how quickly the mood and the tone of her family had changed, and she was a little anxious about Videhi in Delhi. There was still so much to be achieved, and so much that might happen that Videhi could not yet anticipate.

She is glad, thought Shalini, because she is free, but what is going to happen later on? There is no escape from the marriage she has made, and her young life is just starting.

When Videhi had left for Poona—it seemed so long ago, though it was only a few weeks—Shalini had been sad, but it was the sadness of a mother losing her daughter in marriage. Behind the sadness lay the certainty then that Videhi was embarking upon a settled life such as faced most women and into which she would fall happily. Now it was different. Videhi was going to make her own life and it might become anything. Shalini detected a trace of envy for her daughter in her thoughts, but the envy was muffled in fear. What is it we really want? What does Videhi want? She does not know, nor do I. Shalini felt greatly perplexed. She must have shown it, for Videhi asked her, 'Why are you so sad, Shalini?'

'I don't know,' answered her mother. 'I feel perhaps you are leaving us this time to become a new person, and I don't know what that new person will be like.'

'She will always be Videhi, Mother,' said her daughter. 'I shall always come back to you and to Kashi.'

‘Yes, I know you will. I know you will want to. I am glad you can remember home so happily. So long as we are here it will always be your home.’

‘It is the only home I want, Shalini,’ said Videhi.

‘We have not got the pickles packed yet,’ said Shalini. ‘You must make room for them. I’ll wrap the bottles in cloth, but you must be careful with the box!’

Chapter Twelve

VIDEHI, though she had done the journey once before, was still apprehensive at travelling so far north and she kept eyeing her boxes with her clothes and books. She was travelling in a ladies’ compartment interclass and it was quite full. Videhi would have liked to read, but the compartment was too crowded and noisy and she did not want to unlock her box where her books were. There were three purdah ladies travelling with her. They were going on from Delhi to Lahore. Their burkahs were neatly made of black silk, and when the train had left the station they took them off, for there were only women and children in the compartment with them. They were quite richly dressed with pink silk salwar and silk kurta, close-fitting at the ankle. They were young, delicately featured and very fair. They spoke to each other gaily in an Urdu that was literary and elegant, and sometimes they spoke in Panjabi, neither of which Videhi understood, though she could make out the substance of their conversation. At each station they put on their burkahs, and when the train stopped a servant would come up from the third-class compartment, a big Panjabi peasant with a heavy stick, and ask them if they wanted anything. Sometimes

he was sent to buy them pan or sweets or food. There were also some U.P. Hindu women in the compartment, two of them with babies which they fed openly at the breast, and there were two Sikh girls dressed like the Panjabis, but without the burkah and with more than a European touch of style about them. They had their toe- and finger-nails painted deep red and had lipstick on, and they wore open European shoes instead of sandals. They asked Videhi where she was going, and she told them to Delhi to learn to be a doctor. The other women were surprised at this and said, 'So young and a doctor!'

'I am only going to begin studying,' said Videhi.

One of the Panjabi ladies said to her, 'We need doctors in the north. It is hard there for a woman when the children come.'

For some time they talked about children's ailments and the cures they had known. Videhi felt the beginning of a realisation that her life-work would be good, though she was still surprised, herself, at the quick and almost effortless way in which she had slipped into it. Then she smiled to herself, I have not even begun yet, and here I am already praising myself for the service a doctor can perform in this country. One of the women asked her if she was married. Videhi answered, "No." Then she thought what she should say to the girls in Delhi.

It is no business of theirs, but still they will ask. I shall tell them nothing. I call myself Videhi and I use my father's name.

The hostel was a modern building of brick with wide verandas and set in a large tree-filled compound in which there were also staff quarters and servants' quarters. Because of the trees one did not at first appreciate its size.

‘You will share a room,’ said one of the two teachers who met her on her arrival, ‘with another girl, Meenakshi, from Madras. There are thirty girls in your hostel. I don’t think there are any other Marathi girls this year. Meenakshi was here last term. She will be able to explain everything to you, but you know that we are all here to help you. You won’t be lonely or lost.’

Videhi was surprised when she saw Meenakshi. She had expected her as a Madrassi to be small, but she was big built with a broad face, quite handsome, and very bold. Meenakshi took immediate charge of her and the two teachers left.

‘They did not tell me their names,’ said Videhi. ‘Who are they?’

‘The one in the white sari is Vishala. She teaches English. She is nice. The other one in the red silk sari is Mira, the warden of our hostel. She is terribly strict. You know, they treat us as prisoners here. We can’t go out without permission and we have to be in at nine, and we have to tidy our own rooms. It is really dreadful, and then the food is awful. They employ only the cheapest cooks and they are so mean. Everyone says they make money out of the food they should give us but don’t.’

Videhi said nothing to this tirade. It was commonplace, she knew, with girls in hostels.

‘You’d better bathe and change,’ said Meenakshi. ‘Tomorrow is the first day of term officially, though I don’t expect we’ll do much work. We have to wear white saris all the time, but today we need not, so put something nice on.’

Videhi began unpacking her boxes.

‘What a lot of books you have brought,’ said Meenakshi ‘and what pretty saris those are. I like that Benarsi one. The Marathi ones are rather like our Madrassi

ones, only we don't get quite those shades of colour. Are you going to wear that tonight?' she asked, pointing to a dark purplish Marathi sari that her mother had packed.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'And now will you show me where to bathe.'

Meenakshi took her.

'Be quick,' she said. 'I want to take you round to the other girls. They'll nearly all be here tonight, and then I want to have a long chat with you.'

In the evening after their meal Meenakshi and Videhi were back in their room.

'What are you going to do?' said Meenakshi.

'I want to write a letter home to my mother,' said Videhi.

'I don't mean that,' said Meenakshi. 'I mean here.'

'Oh, I will take Intermediate and then study to be a doctor.'

'That's a long time to study,' said Meenakshi, 'but they say it is very interesting, and you meet all sorts of men students and, of course, the doctors in the hospitals. They will make love to you quite brazenly. I would like that, but not all the work. There are quite good cinemas in New Delhi. I love the films. Do you like them, Videhi?'

'Not specially. I don't go very often.'

'I love them,' said Meenakshi. 'I would like to work in a film studio, but I daren't breathe a word of that at home. I like films and I like singing.'

'Do you sing?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' said Meenakshi. 'I have my vina here. I sing our Tamil songs, and I have learnt some of the north Indian ones too.'

She sat down on the floor with the vina on her lap and began to tune it and then to sing. She had a sweet

but powerful voice. Meenakshi singing was quite different from Meenakshi chattering. At the sound of the music some of the other girls came in and sat down. Meenakshi was very popular, and the girls liked her singing. They kept asking for fresh songs, especially those from the films. Videhi was pleased, then she remembered that she had not yet written 'home and tomorrow might be a busy day. Nor had she sent a telegram. She would do that somehow in the morning. Meanwhile, she took her pen and some paper and wrote a letter whilst Meenakshi was singing.

At ten o'clock the girls had to go. They grumbled. 'Why can't we stay up a little later on the first night?' they asked. 'We have no studies yet.'

Still, they went, and the two companions moved their beds out on to the veranda. Meenakshi asked Videhi if she was sleepy.

'A little,' she replied. 'It is a long way from Kashi.'

'It is further still from Madras,' said Meenakshi. 'I came yesterday. I have had hostel food for one day and I miss Madras so much. Do you know it at all?'

'No,' said Videhi.

'Oh, it is lovely,' said Meenakshi, 'especially by the sea at night. It is so romantic.'

'I have never seen the sea,' said Videhi.

'You must come home with me one holiday,' said Meenakshi. 'You will love it. I should like to meet my lover by the sea. Have you ever been in love, Videhi?'

'No,' answered Videhi.

'I have,' said Meenakshi, 'three times, but no-one believed me.'

'How can you say that, Meenakshi?' queried Videhi.

'Why not?' said Meenakshi. 'It happens like that. If things happen to you, what can you do? When I

was fourteen I met my cousin. He was so handsome, and he played tennis better than anyone. I fell in love with him at once, but I did not dare to tell him or write to him. I only saw him for about a week. He was staying at our home, and then he went away. I dreamed about him for months. Then I fell in love with my music teacher. He only laughed at me.'

'You did not tell him?' asked Videhi, shocked.

'Yes, of course,' said Meenakshi. 'I had learnt better by then that it was no use keeping quiet. He laughed at me and said all the little girls fell in love with him. I was so angry with him for calling me a little girl. Then I fell in love with a film-star, a Bengali. I saw him in a film and I wrote a letter to him, addressed to his studio, but I received no reply.'

'And now?' said Videhi.

'Now I am waiting for something real to happen.'

'How can you say that?' asked Videhi. 'How can you say that you want to fall in love?'

'Tomorrow I will tell you,' said Meenakshi. 'Now I am sleepy.'

The next day serious work began. The girls received their timetables and books and began to attend lectures. Videhi had to take English, chemistry, physics and biology. She did not greatly care for either chemistry or physics, but she had the necessary intellectual ability to understand them, and she felt that with hard work she could reach the level required, and then she would have no more use for them. Biology she was eager to study, for it was the first real step to her career, but she found the academic study of it arid and disappointing. English she loved.

Her teacher in English was Vishala. Within a few days of the new term Vishala called Videhi to her room in the afternoon for tea.

'You seem to know so much already,' said Vishala. 'You have read a lot. Tell me what you like best.'

'That is not easy to say,' said Videhi, 'when one likes so much in English. I like nearly everything that I have read, but I prefer the novels to plays.'

'A novel is easier for a foreigner to understand,' said Vishala. 'It contains more detail and background. A play is more direct, sometimes so direct that it hurts.'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'I felt like that about Ibsen. His men and women are like butterflies pinned down alive. He writes as though only to show suffering.'

'You should not be reading medicine,' said Vishala. 'You should study literature.'

'There is no need to do that,' said Videhi. 'I can always read, whatever else I am studying. I prefer it that way. I would not really like to study literature, it is almost at times too real for me to think of abstract study.'

'You may take my books,' said Vishala, 'when you wish.'

She had in her room two bookcases filled with books. There were two straw mats on the floor, and a very handsome bedspread, and the patterns and the colouring matched. She was serving tea in a Gwalior set, of deep mixed colours, and the cups with their thick lips fitted in with the note of simplicity. She had one painting on the wall, a fine one of Krishna with Radha. When Vishala saw Videhi looking at it she said, 'That was done by an artist from Shantiniketan. Do you know Shantiniketan?'

Videhi said, 'No, but at our school we had an art teacher from there, and once or twice parties of our girls have been there. I, myself, did not go. I would have liked to.'

'It is a lovely place,' said Vishala, 'but not good for work, only for art.'

‘Did you stay long there?’ said Videhi.

‘No,’ said Vishala, ‘I did not stay there at all. I knew someone from there. I was at Bombay.’

‘Have you been to England?’ went on Videhi.

‘No,’ answered Vishala. ‘Someday perhaps I shall, but it costs a lot of money and we teachers don’t earn much. I would love to go to see the Lakes and Oxford and London. It must be wonderful, yet so many people go there and come back untouched by it.’

Videhi was quite happy with Vishala. She felt they shared the same views, and she thought that perhaps there was some secret sorrow in her life. I must ask Meenakshi about it. She knows so much about people here. She blushed. I am getting just as inquisitive and gossip-loving as Meenakshi. I won’t ask her.

She wrote to her mother each week, sometimes about her work, sometimes about her friends, and sometimes about Delhi itself. Her first impressions of the place were not favourable. There was nothing to which she took distinct or positive dislike. It was, she felt, a city without a personality but with many masks. There was the ever-present contrast and mixture of European officialdom and the poorer East, and within the East a sharper contrast than she had as yet known between Hindu, Mussalman, and Sikh. Parts of old Delhi were as Hindu as Kashi, and just as curious, decrepit, dark and dusty. Superimposed on this was the Muslim world, richer and more aristocratic, and then the strangely modern world of young India seen in the university students, the journalists, the clerks in the central government, and in the young Indian women. Delhi was fashionable and alert in a way Kashi had never been or could be. It was a capital city, but it had no soul, no unity of its own. The Delhi cantonment, grim, lonely and aloof; New Delhi lavish, imperial, spacious

and splendidly pompous; Old Delhi crowded, noisy and dirty, were all just three more marks on the sites, or near them, of the old cities that had once been. It was as though Delhi had shifted too much to develop character, or perhaps the city had always been in the painful throes of absorbing a foreign ruler and a foreign influence.

Whatever it was, Videhi did not take readily to it, though parts, she admitted, were attractive. She liked the great ring of shops in Connaught Circus, and was impressed with the material that wealth could command. The Imperial Secretariat rather awed her. Best of all, she liked the ruined fort of Purana Kila. It was lovely to wander within its walls over the grassy slopes, and to gaze out from the battlements across the fields to the Jumna. And the buildings within the fort were delightful. She had never before seen any Mogul architecture; all the years she had spent in Kashi she had ignored the mosque of Aurangzebe, so that now she came to it with a real freshness. What impressed her was the evident grace, the controlled proportions, and the delicacy of the carving in stone. She admired it and thought she could trace a parallel between it and the delicate faces of Muslim women beneath the burkah, all that perhaps survived of the old aristocratic culture of the Muslim. Delhi certainly lit up for her some of her favourite pages of Indian history, and she wondered what brought such fine things to decay.

More than all this absorption of the local colour of Delhi, the people impressed her imagination; and of the people, those she most easily had access to, the young girls, especially the Sikhs who were to be seen in New Delhi richly dressed, fashionable, modern to an extreme she had not thought possible in India. In Kashi the image that had captured the facile imagination of the

adolescent girl had been drawn from romantic films, and was soft, Hindu, and always with a strong link to the village and orthodoxy, warmly coloured and attractive. In Delhi the image was much sharper and more vivid. It was that of the wealthy, completely modernised girl, living a modern life without any Indian roots, and apparently without any problems, certainly no emotional ones. It was harder, clearer cut, and practical and active.

Its effect, she thought, was apparent in the girls in the hostel. Neither marriage nor romance were the sole topics of conversation and interest; instead, social life, engagements, the idea of work and a career, and, to a limited extent, intellectual problems occupied them. The general tone was harder, but also more free and sensible. Videhi was working earnestly all the time, but she could not escape the continuous conversation of Meenakshi on love.

‘I shall always be faithful,’ said Meenakshi, ‘to music. I love it. But not to any one song or mood. I shall always be faithful to love, but not to one lover. It is only convention that makes love persist. In real life it does not. Why should one hurt oneself by pretending it does, by trying to make it last when it has died, by even wanting to make it last?’

Videhi had no ready answer to this kind of statement. She did not believe it herself.

She liked Meenakshi for all her frivolity and outspokenness. She loved her singing, and felt a little ashamed within herself that she possessed no such outstanding gift or talent. She talked about this sometimes with Vishala.

‘Why is it,’ she asked Vishala, ‘that gifts like these come? How hard the lot of those who love painting or music or plays or poetry, and yet themselves can neither write nor sing nor paint.’

Vishala would say that we cannot account for these gifts, but that life could be beautiful even if one was without them.

‘Creative talents are rare. But our personalities are also a work of creation. Our physical loveliness, our emotional balance, and the soul within us—these, too, we can be proud of; these, too, we can treasure and preserve.’

‘What do they leave behind, Vishala?’ asked Videhi.

‘Why should we leave anything behind?’ asked Vishala in return. ‘Surely the living is enough. It is the desire for something beyond the living that is wrong.’

Meenakshi, however, had no patience with these ideas when Videhi discussed them with her.

‘You, too,’ she said, ‘just wrap yourself in words like a purdah woman wrapping herself in a burkah. Both are wrong and hateful. Only life counts, and one must meet it directly.’

One Sunday towards the end of November a party of of girls had gone out in the morning to see again the Purana Kila, Meenakshi and Videhi amongst them. They wandered about and were now sitting near the battlements looking at the views beyond and talking about the ruins that could be seen in the distance. There were other visitors also in the fort, one or two European tourists and some students from the university. One of these was taking photographs. Meenakshi was watching him, and as the girls moved off she stayed behind sitting on the stone wall. The young man with the camera came up.

‘I took the liberty,’ he said, ‘of snapping your group. May I send you a copy?’

He was handsome and polite and well spoken. Meenakshi said yes. The young man asked how he

should send it, and she gave him her name and the hostel address and then she ran to join her friends. Only a few seconds had elapsed and they had not noticed her absence. In two days she received a note enclosing the snap, and with it the brief remark, 'How can we meet again?' It was signed Ramswarup Misra. Meenakshi showed the snap to Videhi.

'How lovely,' she said. 'How did you get it?'

Meenakshi told her.

'I don't think that is right,' said Videhi. 'We could have taken a snap ourselves if we wanted to. You will not write to him?'

'Of course I will,' said Meenakshi. 'I shall thank him for the snap.'

'How did he know your name and this address?' asked Videhi.

'I told him,' said Meenakshi. 'And are you shocked at that too? You really ought to be in purdah, Videhi. You ought to be, for you are beautiful, but it's no use to you, and it would be kinder to hide your beauty.'

'How kinder?' asked Videhi.

'To save the young men from falling in love with you, and the old ones too,' said Meenakshi mischievously.

That night Meenakshi wrote a short note to Ramswarup saying she would be in the Oxford bookshop off Connaught Circus the following Saturday afternoon. Then next day she asked Videhi if she would like to go to the bookshop with her on Saturday. The two of them together would be able to get permission to go out for such a purpose.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'I did not know you were so interested in books.'

'It is for your sake I ask,' said Meenakshi, 'you like them so much, and they have a good selection there.'

Saturday came and the two girls went off together

after lunch. Videhi had not been in this shop before, and the few bookshops in Kashi were quite miserable compared with this one. She knew she would not be able to buy any, except perhaps some very cheap standard edition, but there were such riches here. She was delighted. She opened book after book. Then she turned to Meenakshi.

‘I am afraid this must be very dull for you.’

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ said Meenakshi. ‘It’s nice to see you so happy. You carry on. I’ll go to the shop where they sell Madrassi saris just around the corner. I’ll come back in half an hour, or if you finish earlier you meet me there, but do not hurry.’

Videhi continued reading and looking. There were so many lovely books, if one day she had money. She could not make up her mind what to buy. She looked at the time in the shop. It was over an hour since Meenakshi had left. She felt terribly guilty. Poor Meenakshi, how dull her afternoon had been; and quickly rejecting the books she was hesitating between, she took up Plato’s *Republic* and went to the shop assistant to purchase it. Meenakshi had not come back. She knew where the shop was. It was quite close, so she went there, but to her surprise Meenakshi was not there either. She hesitated a little and then decided to wait in the bookshop. She got back and had barely waited five minutes when Meenakshi came.

‘I am so sorry,’ said Videhi, ‘to have made you wait all this time. It must have been dull for you. The time just flew by for me. I could not make up my mind what to buy. In the end I bought Plato.’

‘Plato,’ said Meenakshi. ‘How awful! How ever will you read it?’

‘It is lovely,’ said Videhi. ‘I’ve read some of the dialogues and I liked them.’

'You are really excited about the book, aren't you?' said Meenakshi. 'We should go back now.'

That evening Videhi was deep in her new book. Meenakshi was tuning her vina, but not singing.

'You never asked me where I had been, Videhi,' said Meenakshi suddenly.

'I thought you looked at some saris,' answered Videhi. 'Tell me. I know you want to tell me.'

'Only to you, Videhi. You must promise not to tell the others.'

'You know you are quite safe with me,' answered Videhi.

'When you were in the bookshop Ramswarup came.'

'Who is Ramswarup?' asked Videhi.

'Don't you remember? He took our snap,' answered Meenakshi, and she went on, 'He asked me to come out. I told him I had only a little time and that I must be back with you soon. He asked me if you would come with us. I said no. We went walking quickly to the grounds of the Jantar Mantar, where they have those astronomical things in stone. We went inside and sat down on the grass under the shade of a tree. We were quite alone. Even if we had not been we did not care. He kissed me, Videhi. I have never felt such thrilling joy in all my life. He kissed me again and again, and I kissed him back.'

'And then?' asked Videhi.

'And then time stepped in. That place is a monument to time, and we came back to the shop.'

'I did not see Swarup,' said Videhi.

'You were dreaming of Plato,' answered Meenakshi.

'You saw nothing. Oh, Videhi, I am so happy.'

'What you have done is wrong, Meenakshi. I cannot understand how you can do it.'

'What is there wrong?' said Meenakshi. 'We both wanted it, we were both happy. Have you never heard of love, Videhi, you who have read so much?'

'You should not see him again,' said Videhi.

'I will,' said Meenakshi. 'I must. I love him. You must keep my secret.'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'I shall not tell anyone, but I wish I could make you see it was wrong.'

'Why, Videhi? Tell me why. You cannot. You are just talking like an old woman, echoing those phrases of behaviour that have been handed down to us like so many chains. Tell me why love is wrong. You know you cannot.'

Meenakshi plucked her vina and sang one of Mira Bai's songs of adoration. Her voice was rich and full, and she breathed the rapturous worship of Mira. Videhi listened. Then she sang a song from one of the current films, romantic, yearning, sentimental.

'Which is true, Videhi?' asked Meenakshi. 'The songs or my feelings, the one song or the other? One comes from a temple, one from a studio, and my own love from a garden in New Delhi. Only mine is real to me now, the others are words, however beautiful. Now tell me what is wrong?'

Videhi was silent. Then she touched Meenakshi on the arm and said, 'You must not ask me that, Meenakshi. I do not know. I do not say love is wrong. I only wonder how one can be certain of it.'

'I have no doubts,' said Meenakshi,

Chapter Thirteen

VIDEHI and Meenakshi did not speak again about Swarup during the following week. Videhi had received several letters from Shalini saying that she must call on their Marathi acquaintances in Delhi.

Ganesh had written to them and she might expect a letter from them any time. It came, from Mrs. Dandekar, and asked Videhi to come and see them on the following Saturday afternoon. Videhi told Meenakshi and she asked for permission to go out that afternoon. She was not looking forward to the visit greatly, for the people were strangers to her, and she knew that they were not even intimately known to Ganesh or Shalini. She went along in a tonga to the address given to her. Mrs. Dandekar was very kind. She had two children, a boy and a girl, and Videhi felt at home with them. She realised, speaking with them, how she had missed talking in Marathi. At the hostel and in her classes they spoke either in Hindi or in English. It was pleasant to have real Marathi food and tastes again. It was all very simple and homely, and Videhi enjoyed it.

It was dark when she got back. Evenings in Delhi with the brilliantly lighted streets and shops were different from those in Kashi. The sky seemed more distant, and the harder earth more plain and evident. Videhi got back to her room and was surprised to find that Meenakshi was not there. She sat down at her table to write a letter to Shalini to tell her all about her visit to Mrs. Dandekar's house, and how she enjoyed their Marathi food and hospitality, and how nice it was to speak Marathi again, and how she had thought of Vishnu and Sakuntala when she had met Mrs. Dandekar's children. She had just finished her letter when Meenakshi came in. She was excited, but she did not talk much. She slipped off her sandals and lay down on the bed with her arms cushioned under her head.

Videhi said, 'I have just written home to tell Mother about my visit. I know she will be pleased. I rather liked it myself, though I was not expecting it to be nice.'

Meenakshi said nothing.

'Are you very tired?' asked Videhi.

'No,' said Meenakshi, 'I am not tired, but I shall sleep soon. I shall sleep just like this.'

'Have you been out?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' answered Meenakshi, 'I have been in heaven, but if anyone asks you say I have been out with you.'

'What do you mean?' asked Videhi.

'Not now,' said Meenakshi, 'tomorrow or some other time. Let me not talk now. I want to close my eyes in darkness and bring back the joy I have known.'

Videhi changed quickly and put off the lights. She felt mystified with Meenakshi, but soon forgot and sleep came to her.

Sunday mornings the girls usually spent in domestic tasks, giving in their laundry, washing their hair, and writing home. Both Videhi and Meenakshi had piled their dirty clothes together and were waiting for the man to come with their clean washed ones so that they could check and give in the dirty ones. Rooms were always littered and untidy on a Sunday morning. Videhi thought it lucky they were not allowed visitors in their rooms. She was writing to her sister, Shubha, whilst Meenakshi was sitting on her bed idle.

'I wish that man would come,' she said. 'I want to get rid of all this mess.'

Videhi went on writing, then she finished and turned to Meenakshi.

'You were going to tell me about yesterday,' she said.

'No,' answered Meenakshi. 'You would only disapprove, because you don't understand; and, besides, I don't know if I could tell you. Some things don't go easily into words.'

'Well, I won't question you, Meenakshi, but I hope you are being wise.'

‘Really,’ said Meenakshi, ‘if you expect me to be wise, you flatter me.’

The laundryman came in and they were both busy with their clothes. When he had gone Meenakshi said, ‘I am going to bathe and put on my best sari. I feel so happy.’

‘I am going to read,’ said Videhi, ‘and after lunch I am going to Vishala’s room; she has asked me there.’

Meenakshi began to sing whilst she got out her clean clothes.

‘Do you know why I am happy, Videhi? I am in love, with a real person, and I know what love is. I was with Swarup yesterday. We went to the gardens again. I did not know loving could be so sweet. We are lovers, Videhi.’

‘Is that what you wanted to tell me?’ asked Videhi.

‘Yes,’ said Meenakshi, ‘I must. I want to talk about it to someone, to someone like yourself. I know you disapprove, but I don’t believe your real self disapproves, and in any case you are always sympathetic. It is so true, Videhi. I feel like Radha after she had met Krishna. I wish you could share my joy. I love Swarup, I love him loving me. I love that most of all.’

‘How can you, Meenakshi, how can you say such things, and do them?’ asked Videhi.

‘It’s done now, Videhi, and I am glad. All I want is for the time to come again,’ and she went off to bathe.

Videhi was shocked at the lightness and the ready acceptance of Meenakshi. She understood that Meenakshi was triumphant in her recent experience, and without fear, but she herself was afraid. It is rashness, she thought, but it requires courage. Perhaps courage is rashness. She is certain within herself. Yet, if she means what she says, it is love-making, clandestine—hardly that, she is quite open about it, yet still it is

vulgar and cheap. Yet is it vulgar and cheap? Why should it be so? If it were recorded in a book or a song perhaps the names of Meenakshi and Swarup would be as famous and as accepted as those of Krishna and Radha, or any other pair of lovers in our stories. Why should it be cheap just because it happens here in New Delhi, in the present? What she has given she has given freely, and what she took she took with delight. What more can one ask of any action? Do I ask more? It is fear of the consequences that oppresses one, and if they have no fear why should we condemn them because our cowardice is greater than their courage? She was pondering these things gravely and in some distress of mind when Meenakshi returned. She was singing. She sat down and let her hair fall over her shoulders, and then she brushed it, radiant with joy.

'Do you not envy me, Videhi?' she laughingly questioned. 'Or are you still shocked?'

'I am afraid, Meenakshi.'

'I have no fears,' and she went on singing.

After lunch Videhi went to Vishala's rooms.

'You look serious today, Videhi,' said Vishala. 'Is there anything the matter?'

'No,' said Videhi, 'Only some things are so hard to understand.'

'What things, Videhi?' asked Vishala.

'Tell me,' said Videhi, 'why do people write about love and yet in all our organised society we condemn it? Why do we admire lovers in poetry and history, and blame lovers in life?'

'Do we?' asked Vishala.

'You know we do,' said Videhi. 'And either we are wrong to blame or wrong to admire—or perhaps both are wrong. And why do we hide so much about love from ourselves and from each other?'

‘The night hides many things,’ said Vishala, ‘and we welcome its darkness as a blessing. Perhaps the darkness is good.’

‘You are not answering my question, Vishala. I want to know why we do not talk about love, though our culture is steeped in it and our lives founded on it.’

‘Are you in love?’ asked Vishala.

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘I am not in love. I have never been in love. I do not know what the word means. Perhaps that is why I ask.’

‘We worship Krishna for loving freely. We admire Radha for taking his love and giving him hers,’ continued Videhi, ‘but humans we condemn. That I do not understand. We know love means body going to body, but we will not say it. You have the painting of Radha and Krishna here.’ She moved across the room and asked Vishala, ‘Why do you have this painting?’

‘It is very beautiful,’ said Vishala. ‘Is not that reason enough? But to me it means more. It is an image of what might have been, and it is by someone whom I knew.’

‘Does it hurt you to talk about him?’ asked Videhi.

‘I have never spoken about him,’ said Vishala, ‘since we parted. You see, we found society too strong and we were afraid. We met in Bombay. We were students together. Then he left for Shantiniketan to complete his art studies. He is there now teaching. We loved each other very much. We liked the same books, we read the same novels, we saw the same beauty in the sunset over the sea at Bombay, and we both hated the ugly modernism of Bombay itself. We went to Ajanta together and fell in love with those forms. Ajanta to me means love. We were young and poor, we were of different communities—he from Bengal, I from Bombay; I a Brahmin, he not. Had we been bolder perhaps we

might have married, but we did not. You cannot live together when all the world is against you. So he teaches art in Shantiniketan. Perhaps some day he will marry a Bengali girl and be happy. And I, like so many other disappointed women, lonely women, teach girls and will go on teaching in loneliness until I die.'

'I am sorry, Vishala,' said Videhi. 'You must think me very rude.'

'Not rude, Videhi; but you see you must not come to me for advice about love. The flower came to us and we did not take it, cannot take it even now, for that is impossible.'

'I did not come for advice, Vishala. I came for comfort. I know so few people, and of them none happy in love, except one. I do not think my mother was happy in love. It is so hard to tell. But when I met someone happy in love, and defiant in her acceptance of love, and proud that she was giving herself in love, I was shocked, and ever since then I have been questioning myself. I, too, have felt custom as enemy, but now I have suddenly realised that I have gone over into the enemy's camp.'

'You are too young to know custom as an enemy,' said Vishala.

'No,' said Videhi, 'even I know. I will tell you about myself.'

And she told Vishala about her marriage to Kalyan and her refusal to live with him.

'It is so hard to say why,' said Videhi. 'I was quite certain within myself that I could not stay any longer, and I knew the anguish it would cause my mother, yet to give a single clear reason for my actions is not possible. It is all buried deep in me, and I do not care to recall it. I was afraid then, and perhaps I am still afraid.'

That evening Meenakshi and Videhi were both silently reading in their room. Videhi was tired and

put her book away. She was thinking of Vishala and Meenakshi and herself, just three women, she thought, and yet if you lift the veil that covers their private lives what vivid dramas are revealed, what capacity for anguish and suffering and courage and joy.

‘Sing to me, Meenakshi,’ she said.

‘No songs tonight,’ answered Meenakshi. ‘My heart is too full and I want to be still.’

Term was drawing to an end, and the girls were excited at the prospect of going home for nearly three weeks. Some, however, were going to stay in the hostel, they lived so far away it was not worth all the days to be spent in travelling. Meenakshi was going home.

‘I must see Madras again,’ she said, ‘if only for so short a time. I must talk Tamil again, and eat idlis and dosai. No, I could not stay in the hostel for the holidays.’

‘And what is Swarup doing?’ asked Videhi.

‘He is going to Bombay. He has to. Had he stayed, it might have been different.’

Videhi was glad to hear this. There was only one more week-end left in the term. She wondered if Meenakshi would go out with Swarup, then she chided herself for so wondering. Saturday came and Meenakshi asked her if she would come out.

‘Do you want me to come, Meenakshi?’ said Videhi.

‘Yes,’ said Meenakshi, ‘I would like you to come. I would like you to meet Swarup. We will go to the Purana Kila together, the three of us. You can look after us,’ and she laughed at Videhi. ‘I will tease Swarup.’

The two girls set off, Videhi feeling a little guilty and very much embarrassed. They met Swarup at a shop and then took a tonga to the ruined fort. Swarup was charming. He was very polite, very talkative, very cheerful. No word of romance was mentioned. They

chatted and laughed. Swarup was well informed about Delhi and told many of the traditional stories about the old ruins. He inquired about Kashi and was interested in Videhi's studies. Meenakshi also was very good. They were natural and unrestrained. Videhi was happy and felt very friendly. They came back early and Swarup left them at the shops to proceed alone together to their hostel. Videhi was sure that she must have misunderstood Meenakshi the other time. That night all the girls were gay together. It was their last week-end before the holidays, and they crowded into Meenakshi's room, sitting on the floor and on the beds listening to Meenakshi sing and eating sweets and laughing and joking. Looking back over the term, Videhi felt she had worked hard, and there was no sense of loss, and her spirits were the lighter for the gay company around her. Without entering into it too boisterously, she shared the merriment, the light-hearted abandon, and enjoyed it.

Next day she read most of the time. Meenakshi was not with her. She thought her friend had gone to the other girls' rooms, and was glad of the quiet. She was able to finish the book she had bought earlier and day-dreamed about it.

'What are you doing, Videhi?' asked Meenakshi on her return. 'You look pensive and yet happy.'

'Yes,' answered Videhi, 'I am. I was thinking of poets and the strange tales their imaginations wrought upon their lives. But what have you done? Have you been with the other girls?'

'No,' said Meenakshi. 'Can't you see I am too glad for that? I have been with Swarup and am full of richness. I am wiser than you, Videhi; I have been living, not dreaming. Shall I tell you what loving is like, and being loved, and what surrender is like and taking, for I know, Videhi, and I am so proud.'

'Proud,' said Videhi—'that is a strange word.'

'No,' answered Meenakshi, 'it is not strange at all, it is the only word. I am proud—proud to love and be loved, proud to know what power, what strength, what delight there is in our bodies, and proud that of all this I can rejoice. Shall I tell you?'

'No,' said Videhi. 'You have said enough. I am anxious for you, Meenakshi. I thought yesterday I was mistaken, but I see I was not.'

'How mistaken?'

'I thought from what you told me before that you and Swarup, the two of you, were lovers, that is what you said. Yesterday you were so simple and natural together I felt you must just have been friends. And because you are my friend, Meenakshi, I am afraid. It is only that I am afraid for you, it is all so rash and dangerous.'

'I care nothing for the danger, only for the joy. Why should we conceal it? I am not ashamed. You are not ashamed of me, are you, Videhi?'

'No,' answered Videhi. 'Only I wonder where you get your courage from.'

'Love itself gives courage, and I have never had any fear.'

'I think,' said Videhi, 'love would make me very afraid.'

Chapter Fourteen

IN TWO or three days Videhi was on the train again for Kashi, and throughout the journey she was thinking about Meenakshi. Somehow in Delhi her love, though unusual, had seemed natural. On the train, amid crowded rather vulgar humanity, and with

Kashi drawing ever nearer, it seemed outrageous. Videhi was astonished at the change in her outlook which the few months in Delhi had brought about. But it is not I who have fallen in love or who have given myself to a lover. One reads about it, and in books one takes it for granted and passes it by, but now at least I know it is real and that it happens. Where before I would have said it was furtive, now I know that it is wrong; but Kashi would disapprove, and perhaps in Kashi I would disapprove.

With Shalini and her sisters she forgot Meenakshi. She had written regularly to Shalini once a week, but they still asked for more news about her work, and her friends, and Delhi itself. She gave it gladly. Shalini said to her at night, 'Delhi has changed you, and you are happier now than I have ever known you, and you have grown, too, in knowledge. I am so glad for you, Videhi. I thought joy would never come back into my life again, but it has.'

Ganesh, too, was very pleased. Videhi was happy. The days sped by quickly. One letter came to her from Meenakshi. She wrote that she was eating and talking and singing just as she had wanted. There was no word of Swarup. She had told her mother about Meenakshi as her room-mate and as gifted with music, and of her ambitions to get into the films.

'It is possible,' said Shalini, 'yet there is so much prejudice against people working in the films. I suppose much of it is unjust. I am sure, however, her people would not like the idea.'

'No,' said Videhi. 'Meenakshi said they would object strongly. Would you object Shalini?'

'Why, you are not thinking of the films, are you?' asked Shalini, laughing. 'But I would object. I could never feel happy about you there. A young girl with

talent in art or music or acting thinks only of her talent and her creative powers, but other people, most people, see it differently. They see she is paid to be attractive.'

'If a woman can be paid to teach, or to nurse, or to be a doctor, why cannot she be paid to please?' said Videhi.

'That is too logical a question,' said Shalini, 'and even so the Hindu answer is that a good woman should be a wife and mother; and if fate or accident decides that she cannot be this, then she may serve society, and in the service the payment is incidental. But pleasing is no service, nor in it is the pay incidental, it is fundamental, it is the only motive; that is why we condemn it, as most other people do.'

'And if there is no pay,' said Videhi, 'if one gives love freely?'

'Then,' said Shalini, 'that would be recognised in old Hindu custom as a form of marriage and it would be as binding as any other form. No love is free. Lovers may love in defiance of convention or orthodoxy, but if they are really in love they cannot give each other up, they cannot permit the other to love elsewhere. In love there is no feeling of freedom, but its opposite, that the love is inevitable; inescapable, part of the laws of the universe. Lovers do not talk of freedom. It does not happen that way. If it does, it is something else, not love, some ugly thing.'

Videhi was surprised at her mother, and she was glad that Shalini trusted her to discuss all this without implying or fearing any personal motives. She felt her mother was right in all that she said, but now more gentle in her rightness. People changed very much; there seemed to be as much uncertainty about character as about life. We begin by thinking life will be a story slowly and methodically unfolded and rounded off with a neat

climax, and we hope the whole thing will be happy. We discover in the end that there is no such sequence evenly pursued, that the unexpected constantly happens, and that happiness for the most part is a dream. We begin by thinking that character is a consistent unfolding and development of personality. We end by discovering that character and personality are both variables. Videhi was quite sure her mother had changed. She was not so sure about herself.

The happy days at Kashi came to an end and she was back at Delhi. She was eager to resume her studies, to meet Vishala again, and to see Meenakshi. She felt a kind of responsibility for Meenakshi, though it was more than that. She liked Meenakshi and admired her courage and her zest. She thought that Meenakshi was mistaken about love, yet when she considered it all she found no fault in it. Most of all she felt that Meenakshi was a forerunner of herself, and that out of her experiences she, Videhi, would gather some wisdom or insight. The other girls also were glad to be back. They made a gay community, and in the hostel they had a freedom and independence, or sense of it, that was just not possible for them in their homes. They met again in Meenakshi's room and chattered about their holidays and the little things they had done. It was winter and very, very cold at nights. They wore shawls, for there were no fires, but they did not mind. The cold days would end very quickly, the really hot weather suddenly return. Meenakshi said a new girl was coming; her name, Indira. The others wondered where she would go and whose room she would share.

'I don't know,' said Meenakshi.

Indira came the next day and the warden sent for Videhi.

'I am going to put Indira with you, Videhi,' she said.

‘Indira is going to study to be a doctor and she will be attending the same classes. You will be able to help each other.’

Indira was a slim, dark girl attractively dressed in a bright green sari. She was from Bombay. She looked vivacious and sophisticated. Videhi wondered how they would get on together and she felt sorry at losing Meenakshi’s company.

‘I want you to take Indira now,’ said the warden, ‘and show her the place and help her.’

Videhi and Indira went off together.

‘Do you want to be a doctor?’ asked Videhi.

‘Yes,’ answered Indira. ‘It has been my ambition for long. I think it is a splendid career, don’t you?’

‘Well,’ said Videhi, ‘I want to be a doctor, of course, but I must confess I have not thought about it very much as a career. I suppose we will know more clearly when we begin our real studies. Have you lived in a hostel before?’

‘No,’ said Indira. ‘This is the first time I have been away from home, but it looks very pleasant here.’

‘Yes,’ said Videhi, ‘it is nice here. I came last term. I too, had not left home before; but I felt happy almost at once here. The girls are all very friendly. I will introduce you to them. This is our room.’

Meenakshi was still there.

‘Indira is coming to stay with me,’ said Videhi. ‘The warden said you would have the little room at the end of the veranda to yourself.’

‘Oh,’ said Meenakshi, ‘that will be lovely; but I don’t want to leave you, Videhi.’

‘You won’t be far away,’ said Videhi.

‘I am sorry to cause this trouble,’ said Indira.

‘Oh, it’s no trouble,’ said Meenakshi, ‘no trouble at all. Videhi and I have been very happy together. I

know you will also. I dare say Videhi is glad, because I often disturb her in her studies.'

'How can you say that, Meenakshi? You have never disturbed me.'

Videhi found Indira friendly, but at the beginning rather more reserved than Meenakshi. Her interests were definitely intellectual, but, like her own, various and not directed. Indira had a strong social sense, and was keen on political and social matters. She had brought a number of books with her dealing with these subjects. She was an enthusiast for socialism.

'It is the only way for India,' she said to Videhi. 'Anything else is antiquated and medieval. Only socialism can tackle our problems. It is not only a question of fairness and justice but of efficiency. Our country is materially so backward that only the largest possible controlled system can attempt to solve our different problems.'

Videhi did not argue with her. She did not want to argue, she felt Indira was right. She, herself, was not greatly interested; she thought that the question was so big and remote that the individual could play no part in it, certainly yet, and she told Indira this.

'That is the root error, Videhi,' said Indira. 'Things don't get simpler by leaving them alone. We have got to tackle them now. At least we can prepare ourselves by studying what other countries have done and by learning about socialism, and helping others to understand it. We can excuse the peasant for being indifferent, because he is too poor, too ignorant, too bowed down to the earth that he tills; we can excuse perhaps the officials being indifferent or antagonistic, because they are paid servants and they have been brought up in an authoritarian foreign system; but how can we excuse people like ourselves who are young, and alert and aware? We must

take an interest. Every friend we persuade is a help to us.'

'I can see that,' said Videhi, 'but it does not seem real to me.'

'Is not poverty real, Videhi? Is not the dirt and the disease in our villages real? Are not the slum dwellings in Bombay and other big cities real? Then, surely, the effort to remove them is real. What can be more close to life than this?'

'I would sooner leave it to the men who know something about factories and building and town planning and all that,' said Videhi.

'I am ashamed of you, Videhi,' laughed Indira. 'Anyway, you must promise me to read the books I lend you.'

Meenakshi, who was present, said, 'Videhi will do that readily enough, but don't ask me to read. I think you are both right. I think only something like socialism can help our country, but I also think private life and one's private problems come first, and these are difficult enough; and though I think that women should be free to do anything, it is better if they keep out of politics.'

'I did not know you felt so strongly,' said Indira. 'But, surely, if politics are so bad, then it is time we entered into them to purify them.'

'There are better things that we can do,' said Meenakshi, 'more womanly things, more creative things, and more interesting things.'

So the term went on, with studies, outings at the week-ends, letters home, constant political talks with Indira, and Meenakshi going her own way. The weather was hot now and the girls grumbled at working in the great heat. There were dust storms, too, and hot high winds. But it was cool in the mornings and for a little

while the air was sweet, and it was delightful to bathe and feel the thrill of cold water pouring over the warm body. Videhi was intent on her studies. She wanted to do well in the exam at the end of the term. She wanted to get her scholarship to be able to continue her studies. She felt at times confident and at times fearful. She realised that to her studies came first and that the interest of Meenakshi in love and of Indira in politics would be only secondary. They only affected her because of the personal relationship she felt to Indira and Meenakshi.

The week before the examinations were due to begin Meenakshi came to her.

'Come to my room,' she said. She was in great distress. Videhi went.

'What is the matter, Meenakshi?' she asked.

'It is Swarup—he does not want me any more.'

'I am sorry,' said Videhi. 'But perhaps it is better for it to end.'

'Why should it end?' asked Meenakshi. 'Why should he reject me? Am I not good enough?'

'You know there is no reason in love,' said Videhi. 'You must forget him. I have always been worried about you and Swarup. I could not understand either of you. I could not believe you were really in love, not the love that matters. Now I think you have both been sensible.'

'I have not been sensible,' said Meenakshi. 'I have done nothing. It is love with me despite what you say, Videhi. You are unkind. I went to our usual meeting-place last Saturday. He was not there. I waited and waited. He did not come. When I got back to the hostel I wrote a note at once to him, thinking he might be ill. He replied. He said it was all finished, Videhi. He said we had both enjoyed ourselves and that it was at an end. But I don't want it to end, Videhi. It was real to me, not just a game. I want him, Videhi.'

‘What can you do? It is better this way, a thousand times better. He has hurt you cruelly, but try not to be sad. It was just an interlude.’

‘Not for me, Videhi. I wanted to tell you this. I want you to do something for me. I want you to see Swarup. Find out, if you can, if he really means what he says. I cannot believe it myself. The last time we were together we were so happy in our love and there was no tiredness. Ask him, Videhi. He will speak to you. He respects you.’

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘I cannot do that. It is quite impossible. I could not do it. I do not think it right to do it, or good for you. Let it end, Meenakshi. You will only bring more shame and humiliation on yourself if you try to bring it back to life.’

‘I have never felt any shame,’ said Meenakshi. ‘It is unkind of you to use that word when you know me so well. And I feel no humiliation, only anger and hurt, and, more than either, still an intense longing. It was real to me, Videhi. I love him. I still do. Please help me.’

‘The only help I can give you is to ask you to accept Swarup’s letter as final and to try to forget it.’

‘When you are in love, Videhi, you will learn there is no end.’

‘You have not been in love, Meenakshi,’ said Videhi, a little angrily.

‘No,’ said Meenakshi. ‘What have I done then?’

She sat down on her bed and cried. Videhi tried to comfort her, but without avail.

‘Go away,’ said Meenakshi. ‘You are just like Swarup. When I want you, you are not there.’

Videhi left the room. She was unhappy that Meenakshi was upset and tearful, but glad that the romance had stopped. She thought, Meenakshi had too

much zest in life to do anything rash; she will not hurt herself. She thought, too, how lonely Meenakshi must now be, and yet what could she do to help her? What could anyone do? The image of the suffering soul in isolation preyed upon her mind. Indira noticed her preoccupation and asked her if anything was the matter.

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘not really, nothing that one can name. Meenakshi is upset, and I am upset because I cannot help her, that is all.’

‘Shall I go to her?’ asked Indira.

‘No, you’d better leave her. Let her alone for a while,’ said Videhi.

The examinations came. Videhi did well. She was glad and happy when they were over. Meenakshi had been quiet during the last few days, but she agreed to join the other girls in an evening party after their examinations and to sing for them. Somehow the music brought back warmth to her, a return of her old self. The song was more permanent than the human being, music more loyal than men. Into the warm night air she sang, and the girls applauded. She is the most gifted of us all, thought Videhi, and that gift she must never lose or waste. The songs Meenakshi sang not only soothed away all present worries and difficulties and echoed sweetly in the ear, but they made one see the images so clearly and vividly. All the best and the loveliest of India was concentrated in them. They were a permanent joy. Videhi was very happy going to bed that night, though she did not sleep easily, but lay still with a very clear mind full of the images and delight of Meenakshi’s music and aglow with pleasure.

Next morning there was a letter for her from England. It was from Kalyan. She trembled as she opened it. He wrote:

‘My dearest Videhi,

‘It is twelve months now since we were married and you left me. Sometimes it seems like twelve centuries, sometimes like twelve days, so close is the impress of it all upon me, and so heavy the burden of the loneliness. I cannot forget you, Videhi, and I want you to remember me. I shall return to you. I have only one more year in England and that will pass. I do not consider the time, only the love I bear for you. Dearest Videhi, when in the end you come to me I shall say it has been worth waiting, but now the anguish is almost unbearable. Please write to me. Do not tell anyone I have written to you. I love you.

Kalyan.’

Videhi tore the letter up. She would not reply to it. She did not want to keep it. She wanted to forget Kalyan, to put him out of her life. She was angry that the letter had come after so pleasant and quiet a year, bringing an unwanted bitter flavour into things. She would forget it. All these months she had tried hard to forget, and she thought she had succeeded. She had spoken about Kalyan to Visfala, but that was in part response to a natural call for sympathy. The pain within her was still there, and to have it awakened into fresh throbbing life hurt her. She felt Kalyan should not have written. She did not feel pity for him, only a kind of resentment that he still felt himself privileged, as it were, to enter into her own private world of feelings.

“He is not so privileged,” said Videhi to herself. “I am myself alone, and will stay myself alone.”

Chapter Fifteen

THE NEXT few days saw her again in Kashi, returned to the familiar and happy routine of life at home. The other children were quite big and Videhi was interested to see them developing, becoming independent, with characters and personalities of their own. She felt herself drawn closer than ever before to her mother, Shalini. One evening she told her about the letter Kalyan had written, for it still preyed upon her.

'I did not answer it. I do not want ever to write to him again. I felt angry with him for writing,' she said to Shalini. 'Do you think I was right?'

'Yes,' said Shalini, 'you were right if you still feel so strongly, but you must try to remember Kalyan's feelings also, and not be angry with him.'

'But why cannot he recognise that an end has come? Why does he still want to intervene in my life?' asked Videhi.

'That is what we all do,' said Shalini. 'We are always intervening and interfering with other people's lives. If you are sensitive you resent it; if you are thick-skinned you don't notice it; if you are disciplined you ignore it.'

'We must be very clumsy,' said Videhi.

'I suppose we are,' said Shalini. 'It is only the artist in his few creative moments who is not clumsy, and even with him what does he not destroy or mar before he creates his masterpiece?'

'It is a pity we are not all artists,' said Videhi.

'I don't know,' said Shalini. 'Once I used to think that the only thing that mattered in life was being simple and kind.'

‘And what do you believe now?’ said Videhi.

‘I believe,’ said Shalini, ‘that happiness lies in safety, and that safety lies in established habits. For the most part we do not choose them, but they are thrust upon us. I used to resent their imposition just as I resented the pain and the poverty that came into my life. I don’t resent it so much now. I see that they are often necessary, though I cannot explain the necessity. I think our own faith admits and reconciles this better than any other, though it is probably because I am a Hindu.’

‘I don’t know what I believe in,’ said Videhi. ‘I believe in people rather than in ideas.’

‘You don’t believe in Kalyan,’ said Shalini.

‘No,’ answered Videhi, ‘not like that, but he does not believe in me either.’

‘Do you talk about these things in Delhi?’ asked Shalini.

‘Sometimes,’ answered Videhi. ‘We have work to do, of course, but all our ideas are different. I think the girls in Delhi are bolder, but then it may be it is just that they are freer away from home.’

‘Do you find home not free then?’ asked Shalini.

‘No,’ said Videhi. ‘But then they have not all got mothers like you, or ~~sisters~~ like Shubha,’ she added as Shubha came into the room.

‘What are you saying about me?’ asked Shubha.

‘Nothing,’ said Shalini.

Shubha was nearly fourteen now, a handsome girl, happy in temperament, bold in manner, and not introspective like Videhi. Both Shalini and Ganesh were beginning to think about her future. Shubha herself was not at all shy. She told Shalini, ‘If you are talking about me and my marriage, you should tell me.’

‘We were not even dreaming of that,’ said Shalini. ‘You are still far too young.’

‘Well, I dream of it,’ said Shubha. ‘I am not a child any longer. I don’t want to go to school for ever. I would not like to be studying like Videhi. She is five years older than I, and still she has years of studies to do. I could not face all those empty years. I think that dreadful.’

Videhi was surprised at Shubha; she had felt that her sister was growing up, but she had not expected her to have such determination. She was a happy girl who carried happiness with her. She was not romantic or foolish. None of the girls in the family were or were likely to be. Living in the shadow of Shalini, foolish shallowness of judgement was impossible, though this did not preclude rash actions. Shubha had some of her father’s easygoing temperament accompanied with her own gift of not wanting greatly. What surprised Videhi most, however, was the change in Shubha which had come with adolescence, and her own unawareness of that change. I am always making mistakes about people. Either I am very simple or blind. And that puzzled her. Secondly, she wondered within herself at her own fixedness of character. I do not seem to change at all. When I look back I seem always to have been the same Videhi, rather serious, rather reserved, with a few intense affections for people or books. My marriage brought me great distress, and Delhi has brought me a kind of happiness, and my friends there have given me new experiences, but I myself seem unchanged.

Before she left Kashi they had one trip on the river at night, a hot night in June. Ganesh and Shalini stayed at home.

‘You take the children,’ said Shalini to Videhi. ‘They will be quite safe with you, and leave us together.’

Videhi realised with a quick pang how infrequent in the past years must have been the opportunities for

Ganesh and Shalini to be alone together. The house was so small and the children many. For a crisis or some important domestic discussion the two parents would have to go into the garden at night to be alone to talk; but to be alone in a quiet friendly fashion without the bond of trouble or strain of decision between them was something they had not enjoyed since, Videhi thought, probably since I was born.

It was a beautiful still evening. They left the house, crowding their slim bodies into one tonga, Videhi and Shubha and the three children. They took with them a lantern and ice-cream made at home with almonds and milk, and they also took some mangoes and water-melon. It was always pleasant driving through the narrow streets at night. The darkness added beauty to the old city and hid the grosser uglinesses of the day. The shops with their lights were like jewels, and all looked attractive. They passed pan shops piled with pyramids of black tobacco and silver-covered pan, the silver glittering in the light of the shop lantern and the black pile glowing dully. They passed a moneylender's shop with its large iron grille, its single black safe, white sheets spread on the floor, and a little wooden desk littered with red account books. On the way were cows and bulls with shreds of faded garlands round their necks and smears of red on their heads. Nearer the ghats there were more people, holy men in yellow, old village women in dirty white saris, and casual groups like themselves.

The river was dark and shiny, the boat big and fat and barge-like. They sat at one end whilst the man rowed with a great wooden primitive oar. Once they were out in the middle of the river they could see the familiar skyline of the Kashi buildings, and beyond, on the other side, the lights in Ramnagar. Vishnu was very happy.

He did not often get such outings; and Vasanti and Sakuntala were also gay. They sang songs together and chatted and laughed.

'I would like,' said Vishnu, 'to sail on all the rivers in the world.'

'Perhaps you will,' said Videhi, 'when you grow up. I have only been on one, this river, our dear Ganges. I think it is the most beautiful river in the world.'

'How can you know,' said Sakuntala, 'if you have not seen the others?'

'I like Ganga too,' said Shubha. 'We read an English story about Ganga at the end of last term. We had finished our exams and had nothing much to do. In English our teacher read us out a story. It took nearly two periods to finish. It was very good. It's the only English story I have liked. It was about the building of the bridge over the river at Kashi, and Ganga complained and all the gods complained, and the river rose in flood and tried to break the bridge, but Shiva said in the end the bridge could stay and the men stay, for it did not alter anything.'

'That does not seem much of a story to me,' said Vishnu.

'It was a different kind of ~~story~~ story,' said Videhi. 'You will like it when you read it later. What he was really saying was that India would always be India, however many bridges and railways there were.'

'Yes,' said Shubha, 'I liked it because of that, and because he spoke about the Kotwari of Kashi. It seemed so real.'

'Your stories are best, Videhi,' said Vishnu. 'Tell us one now.'

The night and the story and the lights gleaming in the dark river and the shining eager faces of the children as they listened struck Videhi. She listened to herself and

her own voice spinning its web of story, and for a brief fixed second felt that she had always been, that always she had been on the river telling a story, this very same story to her sisters and brother, and above her always the same warm dark sky.

Back in Delhi Videhi was now seriously engaged with her medical studies and had commenced her course in anatomy and physiology. She stayed in the hostel with Indira and went out daily to the medical school. The beginning of her pre-clinical studies brought her into closer touch with her future career. She was now actually on the road towards it, and she worked amongst others on the same way, and lived in a new world of medical jargon. Indira approached her subject with a measure of idealism. She was keen to make it a vehicle of service, and it flattered her to believe that she, herself, could so serve. Videhi was eager to learn, but she would not admit that it was the idea of service which attracted her.

'In my case,' she said to Indira, 'that would be a pretence. I want to be a doctor. I know it is a good career, but my feelings are neutral. It is the same with regard to politics. Your interest is enthusiastic, but mine, somehow, is not. I don't think there is enthusiasm in my blood.'

For both the girls their studies, with the combination of demonstration, lecture and practice by themselves, were new and strange. They found it initially difficult to learn this way; they had both slipped into the academic tradition of learning from books. They were both aware of their reluctance and awkwardness and were determined to overcome it. More difficult to overcome was their initial emotional reaction to anatomy and the study of the body. It was a shock to realise how cold and ugly a dead body could be; it was a greater shock to see it naked with

the sagging flesh exposed to the indifferent yet curious gaze. They felt that the privacy which was torn away from their subjects for dissection was a privacy torn away from themselves. Indira was anxious to defeat her feeling, Videhi was curious to analyse it.

‘I wonder which is the key,’ she said: ‘the fact of death, the fact of ugliness, or the fact of nakedness?’

‘It is not death,’ said Indira, ‘we know that.’

‘Yes, but one does not experience it so frequently. Quite apart from whatever sense of personal loss or grief there may be in death, it is also terrifying.’

They were specifically informed of the necessity of disciplining their emotions. In the service of science and medicine there was no place for emotion. New values, which previously they had known only through words, came to them as accepted by the students and their teachers and lecturers. Videhi wrote about these to Shalini. She saw here three new worlds of attitude and idea. First there was one in which what she termed the missionary spirit of asepsis prevailed. Predominant was the ideal of service and the relief of pain and suffering. It was to be accomplished by devotion to duty, strict discipline of self, and an almost complete annihilation of emotions. Its means were new habits of rigorous punctuality, a fierce zeal for cleanliness, and a passion for accuracy and precision in the ordering of things. Its best exponent to Videhi and Indira was an American doctor who had spent most of her adult life in service in India. She never seemed to relax. She was not unkind, but friendliness never peered through her many veils of efficiency. There are no difficulties, she taught, either in life or in studies if only one is disciplined, practical and attentive to detail. The enemies are slovenliness and laziness. She would tolerate neither in dress, in manner, in speech, in work. The girls were afraid of her and

admired her. Indira was swept away by her example and accepted her precepts. Tidiness became fanatical with her and fierce hard work a regular habit. All the more so as Miss Sitwell insisted that they must never forget the purpose which this set of habits and values was to achieve, the service of suffering in India. There is no other way to remove it. One of you alone is not sufficient; all of you together are not sufficient; but one alone or all of you can be examples and help others, and you will never be at a loss for work, and never at a loss for faith.

Videhi was attracted to the ideal, but she felt that she could be all that was required without adopting it totally or submerging herself. One could do all that and still be oneself, and to preserve oneself was vital. Indira would say that was wrong. We can make a new self in the new pattern, but we cannot compromise with the old self, otherwise the compromise will weaken and defeat us.

The second world of values also came from their teachers, especially one or two of the older men, some of them distinguished doctors and professors with an all-India reputation. Here science, not service, was stressed. It is true that service followed, but primarily and always was the search for truth, the quest for knowledge, the effort to find new facts, and the imaginative thrill in explaining or trying to explain these. The body was not ugly, nor disease, nor words, nor pain, nor suffering. Behind each of these was living material delicately arranged and patterned which the student had to comprehend and see for himself. They preached an aesthetic of knowledge rather than a philosophy of knowledge. They insisted on scientific judgement, the cultivation of powers of observation and analysis. They taught that one must discard emotional bias, and they made of one's private judgements something almost ridiculous and

contemptible. Best of all, they spoke of the fascination of research and its necessity, and how often such research was painstaking and slow rather than spectacular and dramatic. Don't bring romance into your private lives, don't bring it into medicine. It is cheap and tawdry and false. This, too, Videhi assimilated only in part, still unwilling to surrender, though she knew she came strongly under its influence. The idea of beauty thrilled her, and the artistry of science delighted her. Perhaps these, too, were romantic additions of her own, and even to these she could not surrender completely.

The third world of new ideas and values was the commonest and most widespread, having its devotees amongst many of the students as well as lecturers. It was a kind of casual cynicism based upon an easy acceptance of materialism. Bodies were just bodies, and to pain one became callous. Nothing was private or sacred. Discovery, when it came, was usually by accident. Sex was an animal necessity and its physical insignia rather ridiculous. We, too, were animals and to try to forget this was foolish. Idealism was childish. The prudent man knew what he wanted and took it without further worry. The study of medicine was a series of problems to which there was for each a material answer, perhaps in an operation, perhaps in physic, perhaps in diet, perhaps in suggestion, or perhaps just the admission that the disease was too strong and death the only remedy. The main thing was to be efficient and successful. The mercenary side of their life counted, with sensible people it must count. Naturally, to the girls this was unacceptable. They felt it wrong, and they disliked the levity of the others' talk. Nevertheless, they could not escape its influence entirely, though with them it did not express itself in any form of grossness or vulgarity, but in a hardening of judgement of which they were perhaps unaware.

Indira was still interested in politics, and she had indeed developed her interest. She used to go out to meetings of a club in the university. She was going to one that evening. An Indian journalist would lecture on socialism in India.

'He is Prem Nath Lal,' said Indira. 'He works for the *Hindustan Times*. He is very clever. Why don't you come?'

She had often tried to persuade her friends to accompany her, but without success.

'Do please come,' she added.

Meenakshi said politics bored her, but she did not want to sing that night. She did not mind if she came. She asked Videhi if she would also come.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'Like you, I feel unsettled. Only I hope it won't be rowdy. Some of these student meetings are very bad.'

'Oh, it is not like that at all. I have been there often. We are all very serious, and we are only a small group.'

'Do other girls go?' asked Meenakshi.

'Sometimes there are one or two,' said Indira, 'but not many. Most of them are like you two, unwilling to listen to politics and afraid to act.'

'Well, I hope this Prem Lal is good, or I shall scold you,' said Meenakshi.

The meeting was in one of the lecture halls of the Delhi University. There were about twenty students present and no other girls. Videhi, Meenakshi and Indira sat shyly at the back of the small audience.

'They'll turn round and look at us,' said Videhi. 'We should have sat at the front.'

'It's all right,' said Indira. 'We are serious here. There is no romance here. I have been when I was the only girl present.'

At the table in front were two young men.

'Who are they?' asked Meenakshi.

'One of them is Narayan. He is a brilliant speaker. He is the president of the society this year. The other, the Sikh, is Ram Singh. His father is wealthy. He is a rich government contractor.'

Narayan wore white churidar pyjamas with a black achkan and looked very slim and elegant. Ram Singh was dressed in European clothes in a stylishly cut suit of dark blue. He wore a vivid red tie. They were talking together, looking at their watches. The meeting was to begin at half-past six. It was that already and there were no signs of the speaker.

'How angry Miss Sitwell would be with him coming late,' said Videhi in a whisper to Indira. "She cannot tolerate unpunctuality, and really it is very bad.'

Fifteen minutes passed. The other students did not seem to mind. They chatted away and glanced at the girls occasionally. Videhi noticed that Ram Singh and Narayan seemed also to be talking about them.

'Well, it's only natural,' she said to herself. 'We are the only girls present, but I really wonder at Indira coming here by herself.'

Then Prem Nath Lal came in and sat by Narayan. Narayan got up and introduced the speaker. He spoke briefly, very clearly and elegantly. Videhi was impressed, but she jumped a little when he announced that Prem Lal was going to speak on the subject of Socialism and Woman in India. After the burst of clapping Prem Nath Lal stood up. He wore wide white pyjamas and a jacket over a shirt and tie. He was short and fat, with grey streaks in his hair. He spoke quietly, confidently and convincingly.

He sat down amidst a burst of applause. Narayan got up and declared the meeting open for questions to the

speaker. The girls were silent. At the end of the questions some complimentary speeches were made and the meeting closed.

Narayan came over to the girls.

'I am sure,' he said, 'you will forgive me if I ask permission to introduce you to Mr. Prem Nath Lal. I know Indira, of course; she is often here at our meetings.'

Indira introduced her friends, and Prem Nath and Ram Singh came up and they chatted together.

'We are not all socialists,' said Videhi, 'but we liked your speech, Mr. Prem Nath Lal.'

'When is something going to be done?' said Meenakshi. 'We know these things, they have been known for years.'

'Beginnings are always little,' said Prem Nath, 'and progress seems slow at first. You are a beginning, and you are progress. The new ideas are spreading. You can find them in most big cities.'

'Not in the villages,' said Ram Singh, 'and that is where the people are.'

'No, that is true,' said Prem Nath. 'We are only touching the fringe, but the light is there, and it must spread. It is inconceivable that it will diminish. Ideas can never be conquered, and some day they will win over even the sluggish mass of India. Just now, of course, it is the simple idea of freedom that is so attractive, freedom from the foreigner. It is necessary, but it is not thought out. There are very many difficult technical problems to be worked out, and we socialists concentrate on that. We look ahead to the day when freedom comes and ask what then? We cannot go back to a Ram Rajya, though that is an enticing dream, and one that the masses feel they can understand, and one, too, that the rich feel they can accept, for they see themselves undisturbed in their wealth and authority—but it

is all delusion. We live in a scientific age, and we have got to adapt our minds and habits and values to it, and that means changes.'

'Can you have such a revolutionary change of outlook without suffering?' said Videhi. 'I don't mean only the violence or rioting or the physical disturbances that would come, but the anguish and uncertainty that must come to the individual lost between the old values and the new.'

'No,' answered Prem Nath Lal. 'No psychological adjustment comes easily. We have within us tremendously powerful mechanisms for defence and protection of what we consider established and right. Equally certain, however, is the fact that change must come, and the effort to defy it will be even more painful and distressing to the individual and to those connected with him or her,' he added with a smile. 'You are quite right, the proper approach to socialism is psychological. The socialist has a new mind, a new awareness, and a new scale of values, or he should have. Some of us, I am afraid, think that they can be socialists without changing themselves. They are wrong.'

'I don't want to change myself,' said Meenakshi. 'I am quite happy as I am.'

'I am sure you are,' said Prem Nath Lal. 'There are temperaments that can adapt themselves to any world. Perhaps yours is one of them.'

Videhi realised it was getting late.

'We must really go,' she said.

'Please come again,' said Narayan. 'It makes such a difference when people like you three are present. It makes us adult. Sometimes, you know, this is often like students' debating group, noisy, vain, tedious and meaningless. But it is real to some of us, to people like Ram Singh and myself, and we want to collect together serious minds. You must come.'

‘Yes, please,’ said Ram Singh. ‘You have seen what we are like, but with you present often you don’t know how much better we would be. May I send you our official notices?’

‘I get them already,’ said Indira. ‘We have, of course, permission to come here. I will try and persuade Meenakshi and Videhi to come again.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Videhi, ‘we will, but you don’t always get such good speakers as Mr. Prem Nath Lal,’ and then she blushed.

On their way to the hostel they talked about the men they had met. Meenakshi said, ‘I don’t care a pin for socialism, Indira, but I liked those two boys. They seemed very clever and collected and yet not presumptuous.’

‘They mean what they say,’ said Indira, ‘and Prem Nath Lal is good. So many of these men are just orators, but he is much more than that. He makes you feel the modern world is real and decent. I cannot bear those provocative abusive speakers who shout at the English and praise the old India.’

‘I enjoyed it,’ said Videhi, ‘but I don’t know that I shall go again. I have my work, and I regard that as real and decent and sufficiently engrossing.’

‘Of course it is,’ said Indira, ‘but we must have other interests as well.’

Chapter Sixteen

A WEEK elapsed and Indira received a letter from Ram Singh. He wrote as the secretary of his society inviting them to another meeting, when they were going to hear a talk on the development of

socialist doctrine in the twentieth century in the East. It was being given by one of the younger university lecturers. Ram Singh said he thought it would be good and was sure her friends would enjoy it. He also added that his father was giving a large party in his bungalow, the day before the meeting and that, though it would be crowded with the rich and fashionable, two of India's prominent socialists would be there and also Prem Nath Lal. He wondered if the girls would care to accept an invitation. He, himself, would be present, and Narayan and he would be happy to introduce them to his sisters and his mother.

Indira showed the letter to Meenakshi and Videhi.

'We must ask permission first,' said Videhi. 'The hostel may not approve.'

'Oh, they are rich respectable people,' said Indira. 'The warden won't object. We will ask, of course, if we are going, but are we going?'

'His father is a millionaire,' said Meenakshi. 'I must see a real live millionaire. I'd like to touch him and see if rupees roll out of him.'

'Don't be silly,' said Videhi. 'I expect they are just like ordinary people. Would you like to go, Indira?'

'I think I would. I would like to see those politicians. Besides, Narayan and Ram Singh will be there. Let's say yes.'

'Very well,' said Videhi. 'You ask the warden and then, if she agrees, send a note to Ram Singh. I would like to hear Prem Nath again.'

Permission was granted and the reply sent off. The great question was what to wear, for they knew that the other guests would be richly dressed.

'We'll put on our very best,' said Meenakshi.

'No,' said Videhi. 'Our very best would be quite poor compared with their rich saris. We don't want to

compete with them. We cannot. We should wear plain white saris, silk or georgette, but we should look like what we are.'

'I see,' said Meenakshi. 'So be it. We'll go as high-minded simple students, though I'm sure that is also a pretence.'

Even so they were greatly excited the next few days and were the envy of the other girls. Meenakshi mocked her friends and said, 'See what it is to be a socialist. We consort now with the richest in the land.'

The party was on a Friday evening. They spent an anxious afternoon preparing themselves. They were determined to go a bit late.

'Whatever Miss Sitwell says about punctuality,' said Indira, 'we must not go too early and be the only ones there. That would be dreadfully embarrassing.'

They set out in a tonga, and were soon in one of the fine wide tree-lined roads of New Delhi, rich in large gardens, and in each garden the lights of some big modern bungalow were glowing. At the gate of the compound in which Ram Singh's house was the tonga driver stopped.

'There are too many cars in the way,' he said.

The girls got out and saw a double line of luxurious cars, some American, some German, and some British.

'What it is to be rich,' said Meenakshi.

They walked nervously and slowly up the path to the immense porch that fronted the house. It was glittering with lights and crowded with people, men in evening dress, others in achkans, and ladies in vivid saris and jewelled. They felt reluctant to go in, but they could hardly retreat now. They went to the entrance and stood in the hall, spacious, lit with wall lights, and thickly carpeted. There seemed to be three or four large rooms branching off from the hall, all with people chatting in

little groups and moving about. They were extremely self-conscious and so relieved when they saw Ram Singh appear.

‘I am so glad you have come. Please let me take you to my mother and sisters, and then I will bring you to Prem Nath Lal.’

They followed him across one room to an inner one. His mother was rather fat but kind-looking and, like themselves, simply dressed. ,

‘It is nice,’ she said when Ram Singh had introduced the three girls, ‘to meet some who can still be simply dressed and yet so attractive. I tell my daughters that, but they do not believe me.’

‘My sisters are over there,’ said Ram Singh. ‘Please come.’

His sisters were younger than himself and both very sophisticated: one in a scarlet sari and gold blouse, and the other in a pale green sari with a silver blouse, both the saris in very thin georgette. They talked for a little together and then Indira asked, ‘Where is Prem Lal?’

‘I will take you now,’ said Ram Singh. ‘He is out on one of the verandas. He is weary of the crush of people. We’ll go there and sit together.’

As they followed Ram Singh they could see several uniformed bearers carrying trays of drinks and food, and they passed through another room where there was a large bar and an enormous array of drinks, champagne, whisky, gin, and many oddly shaped bottles in strange colours. Most of the people were drinking.

‘That is all they do at these parties,’ said Ram Singh. ‘They drink and talk scandal, and drink again and talk worse scandal, and then they have only energy left for drinking.’

Prem Nath Lal was with Narayan, sitting at a table on the veranda overlooking blossoming trees. It was dark

and shaded and very pleasant. The house, with its lights and the various colours inside and the vague hum of conversation, was most attractive. The girls sat down.

'Well,' said Prem Nath Lal, 'this is how the rich live.'

'And very nice, too,' said Meenakshi.

'It is futile,' said Narayan. 'It makes me angry, it is so wasteful.'

'What would you have them do?' asked Videhi.

'They are born for this life.'

'No,' said Narayan, 'not when there is so much poverty at hand. It cannot be right.'

'Poverty breeds luxury,' said Prem Nath Lal. 'The two always go together. It is really rather curious. I don't resent this like Narayan. He is younger than I, and perhaps I've hardened. I look on these as interesting specimens for observation. It amuses me.'

'I think,' said Videhi, 'that is even more wrong than being rich and extravagant. People are never just specimens, rich or poor. They are people still.'

'That's right,' said Ram Singh, 'you scold him, and Narayan too. I don't like all this, but I've got used to it, and many of them are my friends.'

'You know quite well what I mean,' said Narayan. 'They may be people, they may be your friends, but they are parasites on society.'

'Even that is not true,' said Videhi. 'Ram Singh's father builds and creates. I am sure many of the others are also practical useful men. You may not like them, but they are hardly parasites. They do work, and they make work. If anyone is a parasite it is poor students like ourselves. We do nothing for society now; we live on it, and we criticise it, but we are quite dependent on it. We are the real parasites.'

'Oh no,' said Indira. 'You know one day we will serve and work.'

'One day may never come,' said Videhi. 'These people work and serve now whatever else they do.'

'You know,' said Prem Lal, 'if young girls are going to have minds so clear and independent as yours I'll begin to feel afraid.'

They all laughed and chatted. Ram Singh brought them some soft drinks and for Prem Lal a whisky and soda.

Indira asked, 'Where are the politicians?'

'Inside with the millionaires,' said Narayan. 'We'll be lucky if we even see them.'

He went on to talk about his country's politics. He was in the bitter eloquent mood natural to the intellectual adolescent.

'The government is corrupt,' he said, 'lazy and inefficient. That does not matter. We are used to that in India. But its critics and opponents, our so-called national leaders, are equally corrupt and inefficient. I find that intolerable. It is enough to drive one to despair.'

'The idle man,' said Prem Nath, 'cannot be judged so easily. You can only despair of a man when he has been tested in a responsible job and failed.'

Narayan would not have it, and they went on to discuss some of the personalities of modern Indian politics, about whom Prem Nath had many anecdotes. Videhi noticed that though they were amusing they were never unkind. It was Narayan who supplied the sharper edge, that touch of malice that comes so readily to the young man conscious of abilities and yet aware of his inexperience. Indira supported him. Her view was that it needed the purity and freshness of youth and Indian women to cleanse the political field of its grossness and worldliness. She was excited, enthusiastic, idealistic. Ram Singh was comparatively silent, and Meenakshi was getting bored.

'Shouldn't you attend to the other guests?' she said to him.

'They are not my guests,' he answered, 'they are my father's. You are my guests.'

'Do you often have these parties?' she went on.

'Oh yes, quite frequently. I've got rather used to them. I suppose you find them tiresome.'

'Not at all,' said Meenakshi. 'I am sure they are very pleasant, only one must know the people—at any rate some of them. Don't you have music at times?'

'And what do you do?' said Prem Nath to Videhi. 'Do you sing also?'

'Oh no,' said Videhi. 'I am very ordinary. I have no gifts.'

'You don't expect me to believe that,' said Narayan.

'I don't know that I expect anything at all,' said Videhi, laughing. 'It just happens to be true.'

'What would you do,' asked Prem Lal, 'if you weren't going to be a doctor, if you had no need to work?'

'I don't know,' answered Videhi. 'I suppose I'd just be lazy. Is it wrong to be lazy?'

'It is getting late,' said Indira. 'We should be going.'

'Allow me,' said Ram Singh, 'to take you back in my car.'

'That will be nice,' said Meenakshi. 'This is such a splendid place. We felt so ashamed coming here in a tonga. We ought to leave properly.'

'I'll get it at once,' said Ram Singh, and he went off.

'Are you coming tomorrow to the meeting?' asked Narayan of Indira.

'Yes,' was the answer.

'And Meenakshi? Do you mind if I call you Meenakshi?'

'Not at all,' said Meenakshi. 'But I don't know whether I can come to your meeting or not. Are you going, Videhi?'

‘We would be very happy if you’d all come,’ said Narayan. ‘We need you. I can’t tell you how badly we need you.’

Ram Singh came back and said his car was ready. The girls said goodbye to Prem Nath Lal and got in.

‘Is there room for me?’ asked Narayan.

‘Yes,’ said Ram Singh. ‘Sit in front with me.’

And off they went.

It was only a few moments in the car and they were all silent. As the girls got out at the gates of their hostel compound Narayan once again asked them to come to the meeting.

‘We’ll see,’ said Videhi. ‘I don’t like to promise, but we’ll come if we can.’

Back in their room they talked for a little longer.

‘If only I had all that wealth,’ said Meenakshi, ‘I would live like a princess in a palace of music.’

‘All alone?’ asked Indira.

‘No, not alone. I would have lots of slaves around me to love, and I would discard them when I was tired of them.’

‘How you talk,’ said Indira. ‘If you loved a man you would never discard him:-’

‘They were very good tonight,’ she added. ‘I was quite happy listening to them. I wish you would come tomorrow.’

‘It will be so dull, Indira,’ said Meenakshi. ‘It is something about socialist doctrine. Who wants to hear that?’

‘It won’t be dull,’ said Indira. ‘It is important, and, besides, they speak well. They are not dull. I think they are clever, and they are kind too.’

‘Narayan was not kind tonight, he was angry, almost petulant,’ said Meenakshi.

‘No,’ answered Indira, ‘you should not say that. He

feels strongly. It is right to feel strongly. At least it is honest.'

'Maybe,' was the answer, 'but it is not kind. You said he was kind. If anyone was kind it was Ram Singh. He was very tolerant.'

'Kindness,' said Indira, 'is not just saying polite things, it is doing things; it is in the motives behind doing. Narayan is fundamentally kind.'

'You know him better than I,' said Meenakshi.

Next morning the three girls went to their lectures. Videhi found she had work to do and wanted to read that evening. She told Indira she would not come to the meeting.

'They'll be disappointed,' said Indira.

'You'll be there,' said Videhi. 'We'll come some other time, we promise, but not tonight. You can tell us all about it when you return.'

'Give Ram Singh my love,' said Meenakshi.

When Indira got back she found Videhi deep in a medical book, which she put away on seeing her friend.

'Did you enjoy it?' she asked Indira. 'Was the lecturer good?'

'He was quite competent,' said Indira, 'but he was more interested in its theory than its practice, and he kept implying that all India had to do was to accept the correct brand of Western socialist doctrine and heaven would be ours. Narayan took him up on that, and they had a great argument. Narayan is such an able speaker. He said the basis of socialism must remain the same the world over, but in India it could not escape Indianisation. It is necessary and right. However much we have to alter our economy and remould our social life, it will still remain Indian. The lecturer said Narayan was really a medievalist and a nationalist. Narayan got angry and said he was not. He knew the faults of India as well as

anyone, but the new socialist India that he saw coming would still be India, and he said he loved it the more because it would be Indian. He said we will bring all sorts of freedoms and opportunities to Indian women so that they grow up in a clean, healthy, happy world without exploitation, but they would still be Indian women. He could not imagine them changing so that they lost the grace and charm of old India, nor did he want it. He said that in the world he saw coming there would still be a place for Sita. The lecturer said he was a poet, not a socialist, and Narayan then answered he was proud to be a poet. Then the lecturer turned to me and asked me what I thought. I blushed at answering and said that although many changes were needed in India some things would abide, and that the land and its traditions were stronger than doctrines, and that as we had been moulded by these in the past we would continue to be moulded by them in the future. The lecturer was rude. He said I should read Marx, not Morris; experts and historians, not sentimentalists. Everyone, said Narayan, was sentimental. It really seemed as though the argument would never end. Narayan was so clever. He asked after you and Meenakshi. I told him you were studying, but I said you would come another time. He asked me if you and I and Meenakshi would come out with him tomorrow.'

'Where?' asked Videhi. 'And how can we let him know?'

'He will call at the hostel in the morning and we can tell him then. We could take a tonga to the Delhi cantonment and walk about there on the open ground. It is rather lovely and lonely. I wish you would say yes, Videhi.'

'You like Narayan, don't you?' said Videhi.

'Of course,' said Indira, 'I like him. How could one

dislike him? He has our views. He is sensible. Don't you like him, Videhi?'

'Yes,' answered Videhi. 'I, too, think he is clever. He is not vulgar or cynical like the medical students here, and he can talk without being distressingly personal.'

'Even that I would not mind,' said Indira. 'I like frankness. It is hard to meet people with whom one can be frank and say almost anything without giving offence. Shall I tell him that we will go?'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'but ask Meenakshi if she'll come too.'

That night as she lay in her bed Videhi wondered whether Indira and Narayan were falling in love with each other. They have so many interests in common, and they seem quite excited about each other. They are certainly good friends, and that should provide the environment in which love could develop; only it does not really develop, it suddenly bursts out into awareness. I don't think they are aware yet. Anyway, she thought, they would probably make each other very happy.

In the morning she wrote a long letter to Shalini, and asked about her brother and sisters and how Shubha was. She was wondering whether Ganesh and Shalini were thinking yet of arranging a marriage for Shubha, and she smiled to herself as the thought crossed her mind. She realised that she felt herself interested in such a marriage and that it would meet with her approval. As if there is any rightness or logic in my approval after all I have caused my mother and father! She wrote in her letter that she was sure Shubha would be a happy and contented wife. Then she went on to describe her visit to the socialist meeting and to Ram Singh's house, and she found herself writing with the conviction that Indira and Narayan were in love. Indeed, she said to herself at the end, the

letter is nearly all Indira and Narayan, and Shalini does not know either of them!

Meenakshi had said that she wished to practise her music in the afternoon, but that to please them she would come, so the three girls went out with Narayan. It was a long, straight, rather dreary road to the Delhi cantonment; the land lay flat and bleak on either side. In the distance was a line of very low hills and here and there one could see the ruins of some ancient monument—‘All that remains,’ said Narayan, ‘of India’s faded glory.’

‘All?’ queried Videhi.

‘No, not all,’ said Narayan. ‘You are quite right. There is much else that remains, many lovely handsome physical things: the Mogul palaces and tombs, the medieval cities of Rajputana, the temples of the south, and the rivers of our land, with the fields and flowers and forests. All these remain, and, even more, so much that is spiritual in our literature and religion and culture. I should not claim India as bare and deride it.’

‘But you are not deriding it,’ said Indira.

‘No,’ was the answer, ‘not here with people like you present, but when I am with my other friends. When I read our newspapers with their scandal and their dirty politics, I get sick.’

‘What is wrong with the newspapers?’ said Videhi.

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Narayan, ‘but let us stop here. We’ll go over to that field and sit beneath the tree. It’ll be pleasant and cool there, and we can watch the clouds move slowly across the sky, and see the peasant still busy with his buffalo and plough.’

‘You really are a poet,’ said Videhi.

‘Did Indira tell you about the meeting then?’

‘Yes, she was very excited and happy too. I wished I had gone when I heard her, but I really got the best

of both bargains, for I did my studies and I heard all about your brilliant speech.'

'It was not brilliant,' said Narayan.

'It was very good,' said Indira. 'You know you speak well, and you were so earnest and sincere.'

'Well,' said Narayan after they had all sat down, 'you have only to pick up any of our newspapers, even the respectable ones in English. I dare say there is much to be said for the old established Hindu custom of arranged marriages, but when it is united to modern commercialism and modern advertising it becomes something different. It revolts me, and I am sure it revolts all decent people.'

'You can ignore it,' said Meenakshi, 'if you don't like it.'

'Of course one can ignore it,' answered Narayan. 'One can ignore anything, but a social abuse should not be ignored, and when I read of a Brahmin widower aged forty advertising for a fair bride virgin aged sixteen it disgusts and angers me. And one sees so many of these things.'

'You object,' said Videhi, 'to the publicity; you don't mind when it is done quietly between relatives?'

'I do mind even then,' said Narayan. 'It is still wrong.'

The talk went on with the quick seriousness of youth. Narayan and Indira spoke most, Videhi and Meenakshi listened, one in half-amused indifference, the other in eager interest, marvelling at the cleverness of her two friends.

'The sun is setting,' said Videhi. 'See how it lights up that low bank of clouds by the horizon. That is so beautiful. Soon night will come with its shielding cover. Other talkers it will also blanket out. I suppose these questions will never be answered.'

'They have to be answered by everyone in some way,' said Narayan, 'and the pity of it is that there are so many wrong answers. I expect we all give wrong answers when it comes to us to make the decision.'

'Not if one is bold and free,' said Indira.

'That does not make the answer truer,' said Narayan, 'it may make it nobler, but may also make the penalty for a mistake the greater. If one is not bold and free one will act according to convention, and that will be comparatively safe. It may not bring the heights of happiness, but it will avoid the greater disasters.'

'We are getting mournful,' said Meenakshi, 'and it is getting late. I think we should go back.'

'No,' said Narayan, 'let us stay here. It is pleasant talking.'

'We really must go,' said Videhi, 'otherwise you'll get us into trouble. It has been pleasant here. It is a lovely spot, for all its bleakness; there is a beauty about the soft greys and greens of these fields, and it is so quiet though so near the cantonment. One might be miles away from anywhere.'

The girls got up to go.

'Have you any sisters?' asked Meenakshi of Narayan.

'No,' he answered, 'I have no sisters and no mother. My mother died when I was quite young.'

'And your father did not marry again?' asked Meenakshi.

'No,' said Narayan. 'I think he loved Mother too much. I do not really remember her, but I have a clear picture of her because of my father. He often talks about her.'

'Is he orthodox?' went on Meenakshi.

'Yes and no,' said Narayan. 'He is not Western or modern in his outlook, yet he never makes any professions of orthodoxy, and at the same time he loves India.'

'I think he must be like you,' said Meenakshi, 'rather lonely, and the more sensitive because he is lonely, and yet nice. What was your mother's name?' she continued.

'Really,' said Indira, 'you should not ask all these questions.'

'You don't mind, do you, Narayan?' asked Meenakshi.

'Not at all,' he said. 'My mother's name was Indra Mohini. She was married when she was sixteen. She died when I was five, that is over fifteen years ago. My father is a local government official in Bombay. He is proud of me, but not very ambitious about me. He would not mind very much if I did not do well.'

'But you would mind, wouldn't you?' asked Indira.

'Yes, I want to do well. I want to get on. I want to work for the cause I believe in. I want to help others to believe in it. Meenakshi is quite right, I am lonely. I have always been apart from the others. I have a friend in Ram Singh, and I have a friend and guide in Prem Nath, but all the rest are acquaintances. Probably I am too serious. Still, I would not alter myself.'

'You want to alter India, don't you?' said Meenakshi mischievously.

'Yes,' said Narayan. 'I would alter the world if I could. With help I know I could.'

Chapter Seventeen

I ENJOYED that trip out,' said Indira to Videhi the evening they had returned to their hostel, 'but I thought it very rude of Meenakshi to ask all those questions.'

'It was not rude,' said Videhi. 'Meenakshi is very natural, and I am sure Narayan did not mind.'

'I wonder what his mother was like,' said Indira. 'I like her name. She must have been very beautiful.'

'I think Narayan wanted to talk more about her,' said Videhi. 'He suddenly became real when he spoke of her and his father.'

'What do you mean?' said Indira. 'He was real all the time. He is quite sincere. He does not pretend.'

'I know that,' said Videhi. 'At least I don't think he would pretend. I only meant that there is a difference between all his criticism and his talk of people he knew. He became simpler.'

'I did not notice it,' said Indira, 'and I was listening carefully. I think he has lots of ideas. I am sure he will be a success. I can't quite understand his father being indifferent to him.'

'He did not say that at all,' said Videhi. 'I think his father very wise and Narayan lucky in having such a father. He is leaving Narayan free. He does not want him to achieve a goal for his father's sake, he wants him to be himself. I am sure he is very proud of Narayan, but he does not want to interfere with him.'

'If he loved him it would not be interfering.'

'Oh yes,' said Videhi. 'That is the worst form of interfering, and it really means you do not love the person for what he is, but for what you want him to become, and if he does not become that then you will get terribly hurt and bitter and disappointed.'

'I would never interfere,' said Indira.

'No?' questioned Videhi. 'Not even if you loved him very much?'

'Loved who?' said Indira sharply.

'Narayan,' said Videhi. 'Don't you love him?'

'I have never thought about it,' said Indira. 'I would

not dare to dream about it. Narayan could not love me.'

'Why not?' asked Videhi. 'He is certainly interested in you. He got you to the party at Ram Singh's. He took you out today, and you know you were so happy the other time at the meeting at what Narayan said.'

'All that is not love,' said Indira.

'No, but it makes the beginning possible.'

'He has never spoken to me personally,' said Indira.

'He has hardly had the chance,' said Videhi, 'and he also would be shy. He may not be sure of himself.'

'I wish you had not said that, Videhi,' went on Indira. 'Now I shall dream. I admire Narayan very much, but I would not like to be the victim of a foolish romance, though how could it be foolish with him? I am not going to think about it. I am going to work hard.'

She seized a big medical book and began to read intently, then she stopped and said to Videhi, 'Do you really think it possible?'

Videhi laughed at her and said, 'Tomorrow you work. It is late now. We should sleep.'

The following days both girls were busy with their lectures and their reading. Neither of them spoke about Narayan. They talked only of the technicalities of physiology and anatomy.

It was October now and the brief monsoon rains were over. The nights were much cooler and the days more pleasant. It was refreshing in the evening, after a hard day's work, to wander round the hostel compound, to let the body relax in the night air, and to clear the brain for further reading later. Outside the compound the city lights glittered and the hum of the capital's noise could be heard. Videhi felt they were in a charmed, protected world. She was growing to love Delhi and her studies. She felt conscious of a natural and proper

development, and she was happy that she was at ease with the world. She had so much technical reading to do, and she admitted the necessity of widening her reading of modern serious works so that she found little time for poetry or literature. But she kept a few books always with her, and sometimes just looked into them for a few minutes. It was enough. It gave her that entry into fairyland and heartened her. She had recently borrowed a volume of poetry. She thought she would keep it for the week-end and read it through and through. She told Indira this.

'Aren't you coming to the meeting on Saturday?' she asked. 'You must. You promised. Narayan will be disappointed if we don't both go. You can read your poetry some other time.'

Videhi was unwilling, but she submitted with a slightly ill grace. She much preferred her poetry.

'What is it this time?' she asked. 'Is it Karl Marx or Morris?'

'Neither,' said Indira. 'Prem Nath Lal is coming, and he is going to give a talk on the place of the journalist in modern society.'

'Why did you not say so?' asked Videhi.

The two girls went to the meeting. Meenakshi had refused to go. She had another engagement, she said; and, anyway, she was tired of meetings. When they got to the hall they found a number of students already present. Narayan was there. He went up to the girls.

'I am so glad you have come,' he said. 'I am really very pleased. We have had a slight setback. Ram Singh will not be present tonight; he cannot come, he told me. We had arranged for Prem Nath Lal to come to speak to us, but there is an important conference going on that he has to attend for his paper, so he won't be able to come either. I could not get anyone else to speak at the last minute, so I will do it myself. I have not even thought

of the subject, but with you two here I shall have all the courage and inspiration I need.'

'It is a pity about Prem Nath,' said Indira. 'Didn't he know beforehand?'

'I expect he did,' said Narayan. 'You know how careless we are here. You must tell me what to speak about.'

'How can we do that?' said Videhi. 'You know best yourself.'

'It is easier,' said Narayan, 'to do a thing you are told than to choose for yourself.'

'Must it be on socialism?' asked Videhi.

'Not necessarily,' said Narayan.

'Tell us,' said Indira, 'what you think India will be like in fifty years' time.'

'Yes,' said Narayan, 'that's an idea, that's very good. Don't you think so?' he asked, turning to Videhi.

'Indira's idea is good,' said Videhi, 'and I am sure you will be able to paint a pretty picture.'

Narayan looked hurt and angry. 'You don't believe in us, do you? You believe neither in socialism nor in us. I wish I knew what you did believe in.'

He stalked off to the table and called the meeting to order.

'Friends,' he began, 'I have to begin with apologies, several of them. First, to our very deep regret, our friend Prem Nath Lal, who was to have spoken tonight, is not able to be present. I apologise for his absence as he has wished me to. Second, our secretary, Ram Singh, is likewise elsewhere unavoidably detained, and for him, too, I apologise. Third, I apologise to you all in that at this last moment the lot has fallen by necessity upon me to speak to you this evening extempore and unprepared. And fourthly, I apologise to one member of our audience who told me quite frankly that my socialism was just a pretty picture.'

'The apologies finished, I turn to my subject suggested to me a few moments ago, that of India in fifty years' time. The first assumption one would make, given so quickly such a topic, is that by then the socialism we believe in will have triumphed in India and that paradise, or a near approximation to it, will reign, and that all I have to do will be to describe the attractive features of our Utopia. But I do not make that assumption. I do not imagine socialism will have triumphed completely. I believe there will still be people present who will deride and mock us—not ignorant people, but clever; not callous materialistic people, but sensitive ones. It is these, the intelligent, the sensitive, the beautiful, yet selfish and indifferent who exist now, who know inwardly that socialism is right yet refuse to join us, who will exist then also and oppose us, not perhaps directly but with insidious demoralising penetration. Why is it that all over the world progress is so slow? Is the sloth and stupidity of the masses to blame, or the cupidity of the rich and the possessors of power? No, it is none of these, though they play their parts. It is the treason of those who understand but do not act, of those who know but will not support us, of those able in every way to inspire but instead prefer to sap our courage and strength.'

After more angry, bitter words, he sat down and the audience applauded loudly. Both the girls had sat still and silent during his speech. Videhi felt that it was directed partly at her, but she could not understand why Narayan should suddenly burst out into such bitterness, and as he went on she wondered whether she might not be mistaken in interpreting it as personally applied to her. She was sure she had inspired it. What he says is true and applies to many people, not only myself, but it is so unreasonable, and his bitterness bespeaks the intolerance

of the fanatic. She felt sorry for Narayan. Indira was delighted with the speech. She did not know why he had suddenly taken that line, but she had thrilled to the enthusiasm of his bitterness, and she thought how true it was. She thought Narayan had a capacity for plunging into the heart of a matter and was fearless in the exposition of his views.

'I think that was really good,' she said to Videhi. 'He is so right.'

'He certainly spoke with conviction,' said Videhi, 'but I wonder if he has convinced anyone.'

'He has convinced me,' was the answer.

'You were convinced already,' said Videhi, smiling.

As they went home Indira told Videhi how much she had liked the evening.

'I feel,' she said, 'it is really worth while. We are progressing. I am sure Narayan will be a famous man one day. He is so different from the others, who are either cynical or crude or lazy or stupid.'

When they got back to the hostel they looked into Meenakshi's room to see if she was there, and, finding her present, Indira began at once to repeat to her the substance of Narayan's speech. Meenakshi laughed at her and said, 'He seems to have been talking about people like me, but you can tell him I don't care. I have better things to do.'

'What is there better to do?' asked Indira. 'We can live our private lives, but not solely and entirely so. Some measure must be given back to the public, and only the best should be given.'

'That is only when one's private life is empty. Mine is full. I have no need of anything else to support me,' said Meenakshi.

'Other people have,' said Indira.

'Let them look after themselves,' said Meenakshi. 'I

am quite content. You people make me tired at times. The object of all your efforts is to improve, as you say, the private lives of people, to give them fullness, richness, a sense of being worthwhile; but the moment you meet someone who is already full and rich and content with life you are horrified. I am the completed measure. I want nothing else.'

Meenakshi spoke vehemently, but without anger, and there was an unusual authority in her voice. She turned to Videhi.

'You agree with me, don't you, Videhi?'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I think I do. The motives behind concern for others are not always very clear or very good, but I do not really know what you mean by a full life—I mean actually in the personal sense—nor do I feel that a sense of emptiness is wrong. The emptiness is the vacancy that breeds hope and desire for other things, and that hope and desire are possibly good and certainly pleasurable in themselves. It is only when emptiness gives rise to bitterness that something is wrong.'

'You are always saying that Narayan is bitter,' said Indira. 'I don't see it at all.'

'We have got to learn to grow out of anger at life,' said Videhi. 'That is more important than altering forms of society. Ram Singh holds the same views as Narayan, but for quite different reasons, and with different effect. He seems more balanced, more confident, more certain.'

'Yes,' said Meenakshi, 'that is quite true. I was out with Ram Singh tonight. He is all that you say and more.'

'You mean,' said Indira, 'that Ram Singh missed the meeting to be with you? I am shocked at him. I wonder if Narayan knew. I know now about whom Narayan was speaking. He must have been very upset at Ram Singh deserting him.'

'Ram Singh has not deserted him,' said Meenakshi. 'He just chose to do something else at that time. No one has lost by it. Ram Singh and I have gained.'

'What were you doing together?' asked Indira.

'We were living, not talking,' said Meenakshi. 'You'll never understand the act, only the words about the act. We were very happy together.'

Indira was silent, then she coloured and went out and left Videhi with Meenakshi.

'And are you ashamed of me too?' said Meenakshi.

'Of course not. I wonder whether you really mean what you say. But even if you do, I do not mind. Are you in love with him?'

'No,' was the answer. 'I like him and he likes me, but it is not love. The curious thing, Videhi, is that it is very nearly as interesting and just as exciting and dangerous, only it does not tear your heart out as love does.'

Videhi smiled. 'I suppose you are right, but I'd better go and see Indira. I think she is offended.'

'Yes,' said Meenakshi. 'Tell her Ram Singh is still a good socialist, then she'll be happy.'

Videhi found Indira sitting on her bed.

'I never did really like Ram Singh,' she said to Videhi. 'He has not the constancy of purpose of Narayan. I suppose it is his background, his family, the sort of life the rich lead.'

'Would you be upset if Narayan made love to you?' said Videhi.

'How can you say that?' asked Indira indignantly. 'It sounds so vulgar, and, anyway, it is not true, and if it was it would be different. I would not take him away from his work. I would help him with it.'

'And would he help you with yours?' asked Videhi.

'I am certain he would.'

Early in the next week the two girls each received a

letter from Prem Nath Lal. They were practically identical. He said he was very sorry he had not been able to speak at the meeting and regretted missing Narayan's fiery speech, even more their presence. He was asking Narayan and Ram Singh to his house for tea in the late afternoon. He would be delighted if they also would come.

'Of course we will go,' said Indira. 'Though I wonder how Ram Singh dare look us in the face.'

Prem Nath had a small flat above some shops in one of the streets off Connaught Circus. There were two rooms with a tiny kitchen and bathroom.

'It is very hot in the summer,' he said, 'but it is central and convenient.'

The living-room was lined with books—there was even a shelf of books built into the chowkis on which the girls sat. There were no pictures or photographs on the walls, just a carpet, two chowkis, a little table with a typewriter, and shelves of books in the room. Narayan and Ram Singh were already present when the girls arrived. They were discussing some books Prem Nath had bought.

'May we look at your books?' asked Videhi.

'Please do,' said Prem Nath. 'I will go and make tea. Things are very simple with me. I order food from the restaurant nearby, but tea I am clever enough to make by myself.'

'Can you make tea?' asked Videhi of Narayan.

Ram Singh laughed.

'I am sure he cannot do even that.'

'Can you?' asked Indira.

'Oh yes,' was the answer. 'I can cook as well. I am quite a good cook.'

Videhi was looking at the books, trying to divine the mind and character displayed in their choice. There was a whole section of books on politics and economics.

'I am trying to read you through your books,' she said as Prem Nath came with a tray of food, 'but these tell me nothing. They are just technical impedimenta.'

'I have others,' said Prem Nath, 'but I keep my mind and myself very secret.'

She turned to the other shelves; there was much modern English fiction, and many American books, and a large selection on psychology.

'Yes,' she said to Prem Nath, 'your mind is secret. There is no poetry here and no philosophy. You have gone one step better than Plato and banned the philosophers, too, from your republic.'

'I could never understand philosophy,' said Prem Nath. 'I do not disapprove of it. There are so many things I don't understand, and philosophy is one of them.'

'It is strange,' said Videhi, 'and rather sad to see how any modern technical subject puts blinkers on our brains. Doctors cannot think beyond medicine. You cannot think beyond politics and economics. We lose such a lot. Still, I can forgive you not reading philosophy, but why throw out poetry too? Surely you are not going to say that is hard?'

'No,' said Prem Nath, smiling, 'I won't say that. Shall I tell you the truth about poetry? If you look round my room you will see no pictures, no portraits, no images. They are dangerous. They bring desire to the blood and distraction to the brain—at least to mine. More dangerous still to me is poetry. It brings fire and passion and discontent, and amazement, and those are emotions I cannot afford. So I exclude poetry.'

'Are we really to believe that?' asked Videhi.

'As you please,' was the answer.

'At least,' said Ram Singh, 'it is vaguely complimentary, but it suggests you are a great coward, Prem Nath. I would not have thought that of you.'

'Why not?' said Prem Nath. 'Cowardice is common. Why should I escape it?'

'It is cowardly,' said Indira, 'to accept the conventional, to behave as other people do. It is not cowardice to want a new world and to work for it as you do, as we all do.'

'Except me,' said Videhi, laughing.

'Not even except you,' said Indira.

'Why don't you ask Narayan about that,' said Videhi. Narayan stood up and flushed.

'I did not mean anything I said the other day,' he said. 'I hope you don't think that.'

Videhi did not answer.

'There are many conventions,' said Ram Singh. 'Whatever one we accept might be interpreted as an act of cowardice.'

'Yes, Ram Singh and I agree,' said Prem Nath. 'We are not ashamed of admitting it, are we?'

'I have admitted nothing so far,' said Ram Singh. 'You seem to have made most of the admissions, and very damaging admissions too.'

'If you talk like that,' said Indira, 'there is nothing left in anything.'

'That also might be true,' answered Ram Singh.

'It cannot be true,' said Indira. 'I know it is not true, don't you, Videhi?'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'The self is left, and that is far from being just nothing. And you are interested in the self, aren't you?' she asked of Prem Nath. 'You have all these books on psychology.'

'That's just morbid curiosity,' said Ram Singh, laughing.

'You must judge for yourself,' said Prem Nath. 'I am defeated. You accuse me because I have no poetry or philosophy. Indira thinks now that I may be a coward.'

Ram Singh knows it, and Narayan is just black and gloomy at my complete exposure. You should be kinder to your host. Did your Plato exclude young people from his republic? If not, he was not as wise as he was reputed to be.'

'The young people were very carefully brought up,' said Videhi. 'Perhaps we have not been. Have you been carefully brought up, Narayan? You seem perplexed and silent.'

'I dislike frivolity,' was the answer. He immediately regretted it and relapsed into deeper silence.

'You have music, have you not, Prem Lal?' said Ram Singh. 'Let us hear some of your records.'

'I keep them in the bedroom. There's no space here. Shall I bring them in?'

'Yes,' said Indira. 'I know Ram Singh loves music.'

Prem Nath brought in his gramophone and records and they listened for a while, then they chatted until it was time to go. The girls thanked Prem Nath and said good-bye to Ram Singh and Narayan.

'May we see you to your hostel?' said Ram Singh.

'There is no need,' said Videhi. 'It is so near. Please don't trouble.'

'It is no trouble, Narayan, is it?' asked Ram Singh.

'None at all,' said Narayan. 'We would like to.'

So off they went together.

Narayan began speaking to Indira about their society.

'You will come, of course,' he said. 'I want your help at the next meeting. I think we have talked enough. I want to do something practical, or at least more useful than what we have so far done. I am going to suggest that we organise ourselves into a study group and do a small piece of social research on some aspect of conditions in Old Delhi. It must be carefully planned. We will agree upon the theme of the survey and select some part of Old

Delhi for the locality. We will need your help in it. We'd be very grateful for it.'

'I'd love to,' said Indira, 'but what will it be?'

'I don't know yet,' said Narayan. 'We will collect ideas and then consider them, and then we will elect the study group and allocate our functions. I think it will be worth while.'

'Did you think of this whilst we were at tea?' asked Indira.

'No,' said Narayan, 'it has been in my mind for some time.'

They were outside the hostel gates now and it was quite dark. Lights gleamed in the streets and an occasional car or tonga passed them by. From the road the hostel compound was a mass of trees and greenery, peeping through which were the occasional lights of the quarters. Within was their sanctuary, their own little world. The girls said good night to Narayan and Ram Singh, and Indira continued to talk enthusiastically about the new idea of the study group and the social survey it would produce, and how helpful their own slight medical knowledge would be. Videhi was lost in contemplation. Strands of thoughts crossed and criss-crossed in her mind. She was trying to analyse the causes of her own indifference to the activities and ideas that so interested Indira and Narayan. But indifference is the wrong word, she thought. It implies a kind of passive hostility. I don't feel that at all. It is just that I am quite without interest. The ideas that grip them don't grip me at all. So I wonder whether they are really so sincere as they claim to be, or whether it is something in me that is lacking or indifferent. It is not as though I had a counterpoise. There is my work and my career, but neither of them are really threatened by another interest. Nor, though I am serious about both my studies now and my future, do I

attach overriding importance to them. I wonder if that is true. I seem to be without enthusiasm, that spark that can suddenly flame and light up a new world. That, too, I question. I feel that perhaps enthusiasm should be reserved and stored up for some really worthwhile purpose, something big that may come into my life later.

Then she wondered at the reality of Narayan's and Indira's own interest. How can one tell whether it is genuine and deep rooted, or just shallow and superficial? She passed that over quickly, for she did not really question it. What was curious was that out of such intellectual community of interests love should develop. She was certain that Indira cared greatly for Narayan, and she thought that Narayan might care for Indira. Both seemed to be uncertain. Perhaps that initial uncertainty was the mark of the reality of the thing. Meenakshi was so certain about her emotions, but were these love? Videhi would not condemn her friend, but she could not herself admit that Meenakshi loved. Doubt, a kind of timidity, seemed truer marks of its presence, and the attendant emotional unsettledness, the sudden excitement of Indira, the equally sudden black moods of Narayan with his harsh words, all seemed further indications.

Perhaps some kind of emotional unbalance was necessary for all people, and that love and ambition and desire were just this. Necessary for what, she asked, and can one dismiss them so easily? And in all this chain of vague thought where comes action, for life surely consists of movement from action to action, the movement being coloured by our emotional state. That is all wrong, she thought. There is the sudden disturbance from the outside; love comes, fear comes, change comes. They are neither willed nor chosen. No laws chain them down. No foresight can predict them. So if the new change brings

pain or joy it is still an accident, and blame or praise would be out of the question.

'Why are you so silent, Videhi? You have not said a word,' said Indira. 'I don't believe you have been listening to me at all.'

'I am sorry,' said Videhi. 'I was thinking. I was thinking how strange life is, and I thought I had resolved the strangeness, but the end was like the beginning, mystery, and I am no wiser.'

'You are moonstruck,' said Indira. 'It is a crescent moon tonight. See how it shines up there so delicately. That is lovely, but not strange. I don't find anything strange just now, but everything clear and good. Even the badness is good, for one knows that it is and what to do about it. I think you invent all this mystery.'

'Perhaps I do,' said Videhi, 'but tell me what is so certain.'

'Well,' said Indira, 'we are living, we know what we are doing, we know what we want to do, we know that it is good, and so we go on day by day.'

'But of yourself, Indira. What do you want yourself?' said Videhi.

'I want to become a doctor. I want to work for the public good.'

'You have no doubts about your wants?'

'No doubts. I have fears at times, but I am quite certain.'

'But your self, Indira, you still don't tell me that. What does that want?'

'I don't know what you mean, Videhi.'

Chapter Eighteen

THE NEXT two or three weeks Indira was very busy with the new study-group idea. She went each Saturday to the meeting, and she went to Prem Lal's house quite often to discuss with Narayan the plans they were forming. Videhi would not go.

'You cannot ask me,' she said, 'to share in something I do not believe in. I think your idea is good. It is certainly better than the talking, but it does not touch me. I will stay out of it.'

'Not even for my sake, Videhi?' said Indira.

'No, not even for yours. You know that would not be a good reason.'

Indira did not press her further. She was happy and busy, and she talked about their progress to Videhi.

One day early in November Videhi received a letter from Narayan. He wrote to ask her to join the study group. He said they needed her help and co-operation. He was sure if she thought fully about it that she would be willing to join. Videhi was surprised at the note and told Indira.

'He asked me if he should write,' said Indira, 'and I told him he ought to try.'

'You know quite well what I feel,' said Videhi. 'I shall tell him no.'

She wrote back to him and regretted that she could not help, and she added that she was surprised he had written considering that he must be aware of her views from Indira and recalling also what he had said about her publicly a short while ago. She received a reply. Narayan wrote:

'My dear Videhi,

I feel that you have made a charge against me that is not true. When you first came to our meetings with Indira I was very glad, partly because I thought you were interested yourself in the same ideas that Indira and I share, and I was happy to believe that we had a new friend. I felt that a new strength had come to our movement. This feeling was strong in me, and, though you may laugh, true and sincere. You may judge of my anguish and disappointment when I realised that you were indifferent to us, and when you said to me that day that I could paint a pretty picture I felt especially hurt and wounded. It is difficult for me to explain clearly what I mean. I am sorry you do not share our views. I regret that you cannot join us in our study group. I do not really mind either of these things so very much. What I do mind is the thought that you should have a personal dislike for me and the thought that you think I have a personal dislike for you. I do not know what you really think of me, or whether indeed you think of me at all. I can only ask that, if you do, you bear me no ill will. That is a foolish phrase. Although you do not come to our meetings, Indira talks often about you, and we regard you as our friend. It is to assure that I so regard you that I write you this letter.

Yours,
Narayan.'

Videhi smiled at the letter and thought how much shyness and sensitiveness and also vanity there must be in Narayan. She showed the letter to Indira.

'You must not tell him I showed it to you,' she said.

'No,' said Indira, 'but I am glad he wrote. You can see how honest and simple he is. What will you tell him?'

‘Shall I flatter his vanity?’ said Videhi, laughing, ‘or tell him the truth?’

‘What is the truth?’ asked Indira.

‘You know quite well,’ said Videhi, ‘it is quite ridiculous to believe that there is any contempt. I knew he was angry with me once, but I did not stay away because of that. I shall just tell him that I am his friend, and that he must not imagine foolish things.’

She wrote at once:

‘Dear Narayan,

Thank you for your letter. It was quite unnecessary. You have only to ask Indira and she will tell you what I tell you now: that I am your friend and that I admire very much your abilities, but I cannot give you or Indira my active support simply because politics and the social world are not in my compass.

Yours sincerely,

Videhi.’

A day or two later she received a letter in reply asking her to come out with Indira on Sunday afternoon, and they would end up at Prem Lal’s place, so that they could talk and be friendly. Sunday came and they met Narayan outside the hostel gates.

‘Where shall we go?’ he asked. ‘Let it be somewhere where we can sit and talk.’

‘We can sit in a café,’ said Videhi.

‘No, not that,’ said Narayan. ‘You did not mean that seriously. We want to get away from people.’

‘Our favourite place,’ said Indira, ‘is the Purana Kila. It is always quiet there, and it is one of the loveliest places in Delhi. Everywhere else is overcrowded and dirty, or else much too rich and false.’

‘We’ll go there then,’ said Narayan.

They left the tonga outside the main gate, which still preserved much of its medieval appearance with battlements and arrow slits in the walls and the huge massive wooden doorways scarred and notched with old battles. Up the steps they went on to the grassy sward. Here and there were flowering trees, and the finely preserved Mogul buildings.

‘Although this is a fort,’ said Videhi, ‘it always gives me a sense of peace. It is so quiet and green, and all the old wounds are still.’

‘You should see the fort at Gwalior,’ said Narayan; ‘it is bigger than this and perhaps better. There are two lovely old temples, very small but richly carved, and one big one almost south Indian in style. It is much more Hindu in atmosphere than this fort. There is a fine pool, too, covered with lotus. It is spoilt by the British barracks that have been built there, stiff, straight and square.’

‘There’s a palace there, too, isn’t there?’ asked Indira.

‘Yes, that is beautiful,’ answered Narayan. ‘I would like to take you there one day. It is something of old India worth seeing.’

‘Some day,’ said Indira, ‘when we have earned a lot of money, we’ll go. We see so little of our own country.’

‘I suppose it is the same everywhere,’ said Videhi. ‘One has one’s work and the daily round of little tasks, and the outside beauty is ignored.’

‘Do you like your work?’ asked Narayan. ‘I’ve often wondered what it is like to be a doctor.’

‘Yes, we both like it,’ said Videhi, ‘although we are still only at the pre-clinical stage. Next year we will begin our practical experience, now it is nearly all lectures and demonstrations. There is so much detail to learn.’

‘How do you learn?’ asked Narayan.

'Like anyone else,' said Indira. 'We take notes furiously at the lectures, we read up the standard textbooks, and we watch the demonstrations on bones and bodies.'

'Sometimes we go round the hospitals,' said Videhi. 'It is not really yet part of our course, but it makes the whole thing more real.'

'Are they any good?' asked Narayan. 'One hears such tales of the hospitals.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'some of them in Delhi are very good. The medical and surgical sides are good, but then we have not the same resources in nurses and ward staff. They don't get much money, and they are not perhaps as well trained as they should be. All that is known, and I suppose some day, slowly, it will improve.'

'I don't think I could stand the sight of so much pain and sickness,' said Narayan. 'It would make me angry.'

'Why?' asked Indira.

'I cannot bear suffering. I want to eradicate it. Also, I want to punish those who caused it. I suppose that is what you feel?' said Narayan to Videhi.

'Yes, I feel that there are so many things to be done and we should do what we are best able, or what lies nearest. I feel medicine is big enough by itself.'

'It certainly is,' said Indira. 'Only I feel that our other interests do not clash, so I embrace them.'

'Indira is less selfish than I,' said Videhi, laughing. 'She wants to give herself up completely. I want to reserve a little of myself, just as myself, unquestioned, without having to justify it.'

'Look at those boats on the river,' said Indira. 'Videhi has often told me about the Ganges at Kashi and being on the river at night. I wish we could do that here.'

'That is quite easy,' said Narayan. 'Would you like to go on it?'

'Yes,' said Indira, 'but not in a big party.'

'There need not be a big party,' said Narayan. 'Just us, if you like. Would you come if I arrange it?'

'We'll think about it,' said Indira.

'What is there to think about?' asked Narayan. 'You have just said you would like it. I would be very happy to take you. We would all enjoy it.'

'We have to be more careful than you, Narayan,' said Indira.

'Why? It seems silly. We are friends. You trust me, don't you?'

'Of course,' said Indira. 'We would not be here if we did not trust you, but we don't want to get talked about. I am sure even now people talk about us.'

'About whom?' asked Narayan.

'About you and I and Videhi.'

'Well, let them talk. So long as you don't mind, I don't mind,' answered Narayan.

'Should we not be going to Prem Lal's?' asked Videhi.

'Yes, we'll go soon. He is expecting you. He talks quite a lot about you, doesn't he, Indira?'

'Yes,' answered Indira. 'He thinks you have a mind. He thinks Narayan and I have only enthusiasm.'

'Well,' said Narayan, 'he is right about Videhi. I would not like to say about ourselves. I'm not sure that he really believes that. We'd better go now. It won't take us long in the tonga.'

It was the second time Videhi had been to Prem Lal's flat, but Indira had been there several times and made herself at once at home.

'I'll make the tea this time,' she said.

'I'll help you,' said Videhi.

'No,' was the answer. 'Narayan will help me. We are practical socialists.'

'Of course,' said Narayan.

'I don't mind,' said Prem Nath Lal. 'I have a strong instinct for laziness. The more you know Narayan, the more virtues you discover in him; the more you know me, the more vices you discover in me.'

'I have not found any vices yet,' said Videhi.

'You don't know me well enough, and you don't remember the last time you came. I recall every word of it. See, I have made amends.'

After a while Narayan and Indira came in with the tea and they all sat down to drink it.

'I have been telling Videhi,' said Prem Lal, 'that I'm a reformed character. I have brought the poets back amongst my books, but she still disapproves.'

'I did not say I disapprove,' said Videhi. 'I only said I did not like your choice.'

'We are in mental chains,' said Narayan. 'When half our thinking is in a foreign language, what else can one expect? Given freedom and time we will recover ourselves.'

'Our best energies,' said Indira, 'are exhausted in politics. There is no room for any other development. I am sure it will come.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I suppose it will. I, too, believe in the future, but I do not like to believe in it too much. If all the rewards are in heaven, if all achievement is to come later, the present remains a miserable thing, but it is only the present that matters.'

'Do you really believe that?' asked Narayan.

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'in the sense that the present alone is alive. The past is with us and we cannot escape it, but for living there is only the now, and to excuse the poverty of the now by promise in the future seems to me to be wrong and weak and cowardly.'

'It is always necessary,' said Narayan, 'to sacrifice

something of the present for the future. One cannot live otherwise.'

'I do not like the word sacrifice,' said Videhi. 'It is primitive and it is wrong. Where there is understanding there is no sacrifice. Otherwise it is an excuse for force of circumstances.'

'You admit those then,' said Prem Lal.

'Of course. But why do you use the word admit? This is not a cross-examination.'

'No; but you are saying certain things, and I am wondering how far they are true, if you have thought them out.'

'One does not think out conversation, nor does one usually tell lies,' said Videhi.

'I don't know,' said Prem Lal. 'I think we tell more lies than we care to admit; both more positive lies which we know about as we say them, and also those indirect lies when we have concealed or left unsaid the truth that would alter our statement completely.'

'Perhaps you just mean you are a journalist,' said Videhi. 'Perhaps you just mean that it is difficult to be honest. If so, I agree.' The human soul is like a timid creature at the centre of a maze. You cannot find it. You only know it is there.'

'Do you think the fears should be removed?' asked Prem Lal.

'They cannot be,' said Videhi. 'Things are not accomplished by an act of will. Some, it is true, might lose their force in a changing environment. I doubt it. We have learnt a word and imagine that in discarding the word we discard the thing it stands for. I don't think it happens like that. Some people at any time are born more free than others. I think inhibitions are a kind of protection, a clothing that is necessary, though we don't

always know why, and a clothing that can often be made very attractive.'

'You bewilder me,' said Prem Lal. 'In many ways you are quite simple, but then suddenly you say something that throws one aback.'

'You are making fun of me,' said Videhi.

'Not at all, not at all,' was the answer. 'I mean what I say. You must allow me the freedom to say it, however badly I express myself.'

'You are very open, clever, and beautiful,' said Narayan, 'that is what Prem Lal means, but in addition you have many reserves.'

'Are you both going to give a psychological demonstration on me?' asked Videhi.

'Not if it embarrasses you,' said Narayan.

'I am afraid it might embarrass you,' said Videhi.

'How could it do that?' asked Prem Lal.

'Well,' said Videhi, 'when we are doing our dissections we so often make mistakes, don't we, Indira? And the demonstrator scolds us for our clumsiness or ignorance. In trying to expose one nerve we crush so many others, or we tear the layers of flesh. And we feel very foolish.'

'The point is taken,' said Prem Lal. 'You are still adamant about not joining the survey?'

'I am not adamant at all,' laughed Videhi. 'I am not going to join it. Besides, both Narayan and Indira feel that I am with them in spirit, so what does it matter?'

'When I was young I was not so lucky as Narayan.'

'Tell us about then,' said Indira. 'What was it like then?'

'You make me feel so very old,' said Prem Lal. 'It was not really so long ago. I suppose student life was much the same, but there were less girl students. I don't remember knowing any; that is, personally. That is why I said Narayan is lucky.'

'Perhaps we are lucky to know Narayan,' said Videhi, and Indira blushed.

'Why did you become a journalist?' asked Narayan.

'I don't think there was any single reason. I liked writing. I loved literature, though Videhi won't believe me, and I fancied I had a gift for expression, and, being very young, I thought this would help me in my job. I also thought news and the study of public events and the meeting with public personalities worth while. I thought India needed young men with idealism.'

'And now you are a cynic?' asked Videhi.

'I do not proclaim myself one, I still value good things, but the final reason was that I needed to get a job, and my uncle was able to get me a place on this paper, and so here I am.'

'And you never married?' said Indira.

'No,' said Prem Lal, 'I never married. When I was young I made up my mind I would never accept an arranged marriage, and then in my job I have always been very unsettled, and also I don't earn much money. Now I grow old in loneliness.'

'You are not old at all,' said Indira.

'Thank you,' said Prem Lal.

At night Videhi thought considerably about the meeting with Prem Lal. She did not accept as true the apparent veil of cynicism with which he clothed his words. For all that he goes about in public and meets many people he is probably a very lonely man. Only a lonely man would make friends with a younger one like Narayan. Yet he is not old, he's probably only thirty-five or -six. It is a pity he has not tried to give more permanent form to his gift for expression. I wish he would let us see what he has written. I am sure he has a sympathetic and a clear touch. His emotions he wants to keep sheltered. Perhaps he has been hurt in the past. She wished she

knew more about it. Why should I? she asked herself. Why should I not? He is clever and able and he is kind, and he seems in need of something. I would like to know him better.

During her studies the following week she continued to think about Prem Lal. She saw him again in his flat. She could recall the room so clearly: the rather faded red carpet, the two chowkis with light-yellow cotton covers with a cottage pattern printed on them, the rows of books in the thick black-wood shelves, the writing-table with its typewriter, the little clock in the room. And Prem Lal himself in his thin light-grey suit with its worn red tie. Nothing about him was very prosperous. He never spoke of money. There were no luxuries in the room. He did not smoke. And she saw him again as he appeared to her in the room standing talking, rather fat, a pleasant smile on his face, unruffled, yet in his eyes a touch of weariness, and those grey streaks in his hair. Why had he said so pointedly that he had excluded poetry—love poetry, and presumably women—from his life? He was not a man of austerities, not an enthusiast, not a fanatic as Narayan sometimes was. He was none of these, but rather a clear-headed thinking man, gentle in outlook, of the middle way, careful but not over-anxious to preserve his own integrity. I am thinking too much about him, she told herself.

Videhi was deep in her studies as well as in her day-dreams and did not voice her thoughts to Indira, though they worked so closely together studying at night until late. She hardly noticed Indira.

‘Why have you been so silent, Videhi?’ asked Indira. ‘You have not said a word outside medicine. Are you feeling well?’

‘Well?’ said Videhi. ‘I am quite well. What is the matter? Did you say something?’

'No, I wanted to talk to you, Videhi. I feel so happy and certain myself.'

'About what?'

'About myself and about Narayan.'

'You mean you love him? I am glad of that,' said Videhi. 'Has he spoken to you?'

'Not yet,' said Indira, 'but I am sure he will. I did not want him to speak until I was certain myself. Now I know. You must not ask me how, but I do. That is all one can say, and it makes me very happy.'

'I am happy too,' said Videhi. 'I like Narayan. He is really very kind. You will both be happy together.'

'That cannot be for a long time,' said Indira, 'but time does not matter. I feel such a relief. I see the future so clearly; and although I know there must be difficulties and disappointments, I know it will be good, and I am content to wait.'

'Your people won't object?' said Videhi.

'I don't know. I don't think so. There is only my mother, and she will understand. In any case, I shall be of age soon, and when I've finished my medical studies I shall be independent. Once this year is finished we have only three more to do, and by then Narayan will have a job of his own. Wherever he is I shall work.'

'You will keep your profession then?'

'Of course, after all this training, and I love it and it is not difficult. Narayan won't mind, and it will make things easier for both of us. Really I don't look so far ahead as that. I only feel the joy of the present, and the vaguer knowledge that the future can unroll itself happily for us.'

'When did you know?' said Videhi.

'I think that from the first moment I met him I loved him, although I would not have said so then. I have always admired him, but the admiration is nothing. I

would love him even if he were not clever or brilliant. I think I knew when we were together last.'

'And you are sure he loves you?'

'We have been together so much. I think he needs me as much as I need him. He will tell me when he is ready. When I go home for the holidays he is sure to write to me, for we have still much to do and decide about our survey.'

The holidays were only a few days off, and Videhi was thinking of the return to Kashi and also wondering about Shubha. She was convinced that Shalini and Ganesh would do something about her marriage very soon, and she would be glad when the marriage was agreed to and over. That would mean a tacit forgetting of the mistake she had made, a closure to the Poona incident, and admission that it did not matter so very much. Shubha was so good and attractive and so homely that she could not see anyone refusing her because her elder sister had made an inauspicious marriage. Still, she would feel happier herself when it was accomplished. It would be dreadful to think that she was a bar to her sister's happiness; but it would not, could not happen like that.

She had been thinking these thoughts when she received a letter. Except from Kashi, from Shalini or her sisters, she did not get many letters. This one, however, she recognised. It was from Prem Lal. He wrote:

'My dear Videhi,

It would make me very happy if you could see me before you go away on your holidays. Would you come tonight at seven?

Yours affectionately,
Prem Lal.'

I'll have no time to tell him, said Videhi to herself. Well, it does not matter. I'll be there at seven and then he'll know. She did not think even for a moment of not going.

She was at his flat at seven.

'I am glad you have come,' said Prem Lal. 'I have been anxious all day lest you should not. I hope you do not mind being here alone with me.'

'I did not think of that at all,' said Videhi.

'I wanted you alone, Videhi. I wanted to tell you something. I wanted to ask you something. Promise me you will listen quietly.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I promise.'

'I don't know how to begin,' said Prem Lal. 'I had it all prepared. I have said it to myself a hundred times today and the last few days, and now you are here I am tongue-tied. Videhi, Videhi, I love you. Ever since I met you I have loved you. You walked into my life. I worship you, Videhi. You don't know how beautiful you are, how rich your mind, how simple your taste, how wise your judgement. Videhi, as if all that mattered, though it does. I love you. I love you for all you are and for so many other reasons, but they are all the same. I love you, and I shall always love you. Now you tell me you are hurt, surprised, disgusted.'

'I am none of those things, Prem Lal,' said Videhi.

'I could never be hurt by you.'

'You do not mind my telling you I love you?'

'I like it, Prem Nath,' said Videhi. 'You see, I love you too.'

Prem Nath stood up and went to Videhi.

'You are not afraid of me?'

'No,' said Videhi, and as he put his arms around her to kiss her, she embraced him too, and let her body relax in deep sensuous thrills. Then, slowly, she withdrew.

‘I am not afraid at all, Prem Nath,’ she said. ‘But we must not kiss again, not at least for some time.’

‘My dear, my darling,’ said Prem Nath, ‘whatever you say. I am clay in your hands, but you must let me continue, Videhi. You must marry me. I know that I am poor. I am much older than you. I don’t think I’ll ever be successful in life, but none of that really matters. We can be so happy together. Life with you would be paradise. I want no other heaven.’

‘I wish you had not said that just yet,’ said Videhi. ‘Kiss me again quickly, and do not let me go. Kiss me and let me forget.’

He kissed her and they both trembled, then he loosed his hold.

‘If you are not afraid of love, Videhi, if you are not ashamed to kiss me, why should the word marriage shock you?’

Videhi sat down on the chowki.

‘Sit on the floor near me, Prem Nath,’ she said. ‘Let me hold your hand. Listen to me and don’t let go. As long as you touch me I know you love me and will believe in me. It is not I who am shocked, Prem Nath. It is you who will be shocked and hurt, and surprised too. I cannot marry you, Prem Nath.’

‘Why not?’ said Prem Nath. ‘We can have a civil marriage. The form of words is different, but the essence is the same.’

‘It is not that at all,’ said Videhi. ‘I want you to listen to me. It is not easy for me, either. Promise me when I have said it that you will kiss me again. It may be your last kiss, Prem Nath. It may be our last kiss. I cannot marry you because I am already married. I was married before I came to Delhi. I left my husband at once. I refused to live with him, yet I still belong to him,

I am still his Hindu wife for ever. Now kiss me, Prem Nath, even if it is for the last time.'

Prem Nath turned round and, kneeling at her feet, kissed her as she sat, and he could feel the tears fall down her face and taste the salt on her lips. She held on to him tightly and would not let him go. Suddenly she relaxed and she stood up.

'Now I shall go, Prem Nath, before you say you hate me.'

'Don't go, Videhi, don't go. I might have guessed the gods would have some cruel turn for us. But don't go. After all, what is marriage, Videhi? We love each other, we can live together. No-one need know we are not married.'

'I am not afraid of that for myself,' said Videhi, 'but I am afraid of it for you and for others. We could not keep it secret, Prem Nath. My husband will come back to India soon. It would be known. It would damage you. It would be impossible for me to be a doctor. It would hurt my family, my mother, my sisters. You must not ask all that of me. I shall go, Prem Nath. You have made me very happy, and I have made you miserable. I shall go before you get angry with me. Good night.'

Next morning there were three letters for Videhi. The first was from Shalini. She wrote:

'My dear Videhi,

I am very happy to tell you that we have found a good husband for Shubha. He is young and kind. He is not wealthy, he works in a bank and someday he may do well. At least he will always be able to keep Shubha respectable. They have seen each other, and Shubha is content. We are going to have the marriage as soon as you come back. It will be quite a simple one, for neither of us have much money to spare.

I know it will be good, and I know you will be happy to hear about it. Ganesh is also pleased.

Your loving mother,

Shalini.'~

The second letter was much longer and was from Prem Nath. She opened it with trembling hands. He began:

'My dearest Videhi,

Ever since you left I have been in a delirium of delight and pain. Before last night I imagined all sorts of difficulties. I thought you would laugh at me. I thought you would despise me for being old. I thought you would mock me for being poor and daring to love you. When you admitted your love and accepted mine so richly, I was transformed. We talk so much of love, yet till we know it we are utterly ignorant. Your kiss proved to me, Videhi, not only that you loved me, it proved to me all the poets' words about immortality and heaven and the existence of the kind loving gods. I can never think badly of the world again, nor cheaply of it. You have enriched life for me. You have taught me the beginnings of the depths of passion. Dearest Videhi, you have given me so much and brought intoxicating happiness to me. My room is perfumed with you. I can still smell the jasmin and the oil of your hair. I can still feel the soft touch of your sari, and the warmth of your living body beneath, and I can thrill again and again until I get weak with the touch of your lips on mine. Dearest Videhi, I love you—those simple words are so inadequate, but they are the only ones, they are the best ones. There is no end to our love, Videhi; there is only a beginning. It will go on until, like a new star, it

reaches the heavens and illuminates the darkness with its radiance. What you told me, Videhi, about your marriage is nothing. We will overcome that. Only let us meet again and be with each other. Nothing is impossible, Videhi. We will plan our lives carefully and without hurry. You must not escape me, Videhi. We can wait if waiting is required. We can start a new life together elsewhere. Send word at once that you love me and will see me. Dearest Videhi, I love you. I want to say that again and again. I want to tell people. I want to cry it aloud. We belong to each other, Videhi, now and for ever. Please write at once to me.

Your loving
Prem Nath.'

Videhi read and re-read the letter. It made her so happy. She touched the letter with her fingers and thought, he has written all that. She was glad he had written, and happy, too, at what Shalini had said in her letter. The third letter was from Narayan. She wondered why he should have written. She was just going to read it when Indira came into the room.

'You must hurry, Videhi,' she said. 'We will be late for our first lecture.'

Videhi slipped the letters into her notebook.

'You look excited,' said Indira, 'and your eyes shine as though you have been crying. Is there anything wrong?'

'No,' said Videhi. 'My mother has written that my sister is to be married when I get home. I am very happy.'

'That is really good,' said Indira. 'I am so glad. You must let me buy a sari for her for a present.'

'You don't know Shubha,' said Videhi.

'I know you, don't I,' said Indira, 'and is not that enough? Come, we must hurry.'

'I shall write home at lunchtime,' said Videhi.

She thought that morning would never end. For once she paid no attention. The lecture seemed to go on and on, and though she scribbled furiously in her notebook she did not know what she was writing. She kept fingering Prem Nath's letter and was happy each time she touched it. She had quite forgotten Narayan's letter. After the lectures were over she hurried through lunch and went quickly to her room. She wrote a brief note to her mother and enclosed one also for Shubha to say how happy she was at the idea of her marriage, and how she looked forward to the wedding. Then she wrote to Prem Lal:

'Dearest,

I will not call you by your name until you are really my own. Your letter made me very happy. I have just heard from my mother that my sister is getting married as soon as I return to Kashi. I go there in three days' time. I will see you again the day before I go. You must be patient the short time between. I believe in you.

With all my love,
Videhi.'

She read what she had written several times and kissed the letter before she enclosed it in its envelope. Then she went out to post her letters. In the afternoon she and Indira were in the demonstration theatre doing dissections. She had recovered control of herself now and was quite calm and collected and able to follow the technical work. After tea she sat down to study her books and then she remembered there was a third letter, from Narayan, which she had not yet read. She opened it. He wrote:

'My dear Videhi,

I do not know whether or not you will be surprised to get this letter. I can tell so little about you. I do not know whether or not you have noticed I never call you by your name directly. I dare not. It means so much to me. Ever since I met you I have been tormented and I did not know what the torment meant. Now I do, and now I have the courage to tell you. I love you, Videhi. I love you intensely, beyond description. I would give anything, everything for you. I do not know what to tell you. Videhi, I want you, I need you. Please don't hate me for saying this. I have never been alone with you. I do not know if I would dare to be alone with you. Now I have written I feel happier. At least I have told. I want you to love me, Videhi. I cannot imagine how that can be possible. Please, at least, let me know that you are not offended. Please tell me that there is some hope in time. Ask anything of me and I will do it; only one thing you must not ask, for that is impossible. Do not ask me not to love; that is in my blood, my stars, my fate. I love you, Videhi, and always shall. Please answer my letter.

Narayan.'

Videhi stared at the letter in great distress. She was thinking mainly of Indira, and of how unhappy she would be if she learnt what Narayan had written. She was also anxious about Narayan himself. She felt no anger with him for writing the letter, but only dismay at the pain he must feel and fear lest in his disillusionment he did something rash. She wondered also what he would say or do if he heard about herself and Prem Nath. If only she were in Kashi away from all this trouble! But she was here in Delhi, and in fairness she must tell

Narayan something. She wondered whether it would be better to see him. She wondered, too, whether she should ask Prem Nath's advice. Then she told herself, There is no problem at all. There is only one answer I can give Narayan, and equally clearly I, shall not tell Indira. If she discovers ever, it will be through Narayan, not me. And Prem Nath must be told. Tomorrow, she told herself, I will write the letter, and in one more day I shall see Prem Nath. And with that thought in her head she went to sleep, happy.

Chapter Nineteen

VIDEHI was quite clear in her own mind next morning when she awoke; she felt like the weather, bright and fresh, and as soon as she was dressed she wrote to Narayan:

My dear Narayan,

'I was very grieved to receive your letter, for I know that my answer can only pain you. I do not question what you say, though I would be happy if you had misunderstood your feelings. I cannot say that I love you, because I do not, but I would like to remain your friend, and I am sure that in your work and studies you will soon forget your infatuation and find someone before long better in every way than I, more sympathetic to you, and more responsive.

Yours,
Videhi.'

She was happy when she had posted it. Indira noticed her cheerfulness and asked her why.

'It's because I am going home,' said Videhi, suddenly struck with a sense of guilt.

'You must come with me this afternoon,' said Indira, 'to buy a sari for your sister. You must let me do that.'

In the afternoon they went by tonga to Old Delhi.

They went down the crowded Chandni Chowk, full with bustling people, tongas and bicycles. They went inside one shop and sat down on a wooden bench. From the street it looked a poor shop, but inside, although there was no pretence at layout or display, there was an enormous stock of saris in cotton, silk, muslin, georgette, some thin and light and gossamer, others heavy with silver and gold thread.

'We should buy something useful,' said Videhi.

'It can be nice as well,' said Indira.

They looked through the saris. Some of them were very good, and they enjoyed handling them, but there were many really ridiculous printed ones with fantastic designs on their border.

'Who could wear these?' asked Indira. 'We want something plain and simple, with a thin border. I shall buy some cotton ones for myself too.'

In the end purchases were made. Indira had bought two white cotton saris, each with a narrow red border, and a georgette one in mauve with a very delicate pattern of golden mango leaf on the palla.

'We only get married once,' she said to Videhi, 'and I want your sister to have something nice from me. Perhaps I might come to Kashi one day and see you all.'

On the way back they passed the great Jami Masjid.

'I hate that place,' said Indira. 'I know it is supposed to be beautiful, but it is so big and bold, it is an affront. I like the little mosques with their small white courtyards set amidst trees, not a monster like that.'

She kept talking about the wedding in Kashi and asking about Videhi's other sisters.

'I wish I had a sister,' she said. 'You are so lucky to have three and a brother too.'

Back at the hostel they opened their parcel and the other girls came and looked and admired, and the conversation was general about saris and marriage. One of the girls asked Indira when she was going to get married, and instead of answering she blushed, which amused them all.

Videhi felt very unhappy about Narayan and Indira. She hoped Indira would not come to know of the letter Narayan had written. She had been so certain that Narayan and Indira would fall in love together. Another of my mistaken judgements, she said to herself. I'd really better stop judging. The immediate conclusion is always wrong. I suppose it is that I cannot separate what I would like to see from what I do really see. My imagination jumps ahead of reality. It is too fertile. Though she was a little worried, the thought of meeting Prem Nath again so soon possessed her and made her content. Against the certainty of that happiness all other things were minor. Next day she was to go. Work had finished by now. Some of the girls were packing to leave at once, others were going late at night. Videhi was taking an early-morning train. She dressed herself carefully and wondered long before she finally chose her sari. I won't wear a cotton one. I'll wear something good. She had with her a deep red Madrassi sari with a wide gold border; she had never worn it before, thinking it was too grand for hostel occasions and herself. Luckily she had a white silk blouse that would suit it. For once she regretted that she had no gold for her neck or arms. She had never since worn the gold necklace Shalini had given her at her marriage with Kalyan. She had left it in Kashi. It was

not really part of Poona, but she had always associated it with those unhappy days. In her hair she put jasmine buds. Indira came in just as she was ready to go.

'You are magnificent this evening,' said Indira. 'You look like a bride. I have never seen you so beautiful. Where are you going?'

'To a friend,' said Videhi. 'I won't be long. I have never worn this sari before. I wanted to try it.'

And she ran out before Indira could ask any more questions.

In a few minutes she was at Prem Nath's flat. He opened the door for her.

'My dear,' he said, 'you have come.'

As he closed the door they kissed each other.

'That is enough,' said Videhi, 'for the time. I must not stay long, Prem Nath, and there is so much to discuss.'

'There is nothing to discuss,' said Prem Nath, 'with you present. All problems resolve themselves away. You are so beautiful tonight, Videhi. You are always beautiful, but tonight you are rich. You are clothed in fire and splendour, and the light in your eyes is bright, and your lips speak to mine.'

He kissed her again.

'No, no,' said Videhi, 'we will never finish.'

'We don't want to finish,' said Prem Nath. 'If only I were a painter. If I could seize you now in colour, all the world would know your beauty; the colour, the laughter in your eyes, and the depth behind the laughter, and the wisdom in your brow, and the grace of your body. My dear, to look at you makes me tremble.'

'Please,' said Videhi, 'let us be sensible. I am going away tomorrow. I won't be back for three whole weeks. I want to leave knowing you are happy and that things are certain. It is not easy to make things certain. You know

so little about me. I want to tell you, but if you keep on kissing me, how can I? But first I must show you this,' and she gave him Narayan's letter. Prem Nath took it and read it and laughed.

'It is nothing,' he said. 'It is inevitable.'

'I am worried about Narayan,' said Videhi. 'He is so sensitive and impetuous. I do not want him to know about ourselves. You see, I was quite certain he was falling in love with Indira. I know she loves him. It will be dreadful if they both discover what the truth is. I want you to help me about Narayan; he is your friend and through him we met.'

'Yes,' said Prem Nath, 'we owe him that, we owe him much. But love is very selfish, Videhi, and some people are born to be unhappy in love. I do not know what you want me to do.'

'Get him to absorb himself in his work,' said Videhi.

'He does that already.'

'I don't want him to do anything rash,' said Videhi. 'I want him to be drawn to Indira.'

'That is not easy,' said Prem Nath. 'Perhaps it will not be necessary.'

They were sitting on the chowki holding each other's hand. Videhi was so intent and occupied with her happiness and with being close to Prem Nath that she did not consciously notice the room. Yet every detail was present at the back of her mind: the books, a few with their torn edges, the slightly faded carpet, the window looking out on to the busy street below. As she talked she was free, happy, unrestrained, and with a positive delight in that freedom and the warm sense of comfort it gave. She had not known it before. It was more than being natural, being at ease, being happy, being content. It was all this plus positive delight. Yet the delight was no burden. Time disappeared in this communion with Prem Nath.

Even to be with him thus was a bliss as acute and lovely as the thrills of kissing and feeling his body so closely tight to hers. She moved a little from Prem Nath, still holding his hand gently, but with her arm outstretched and gazing at him.

‘I don’t want him to know about us yet,’ she said. ‘I want him to get over his present shock. As we are all such close friends, it will be very hard to keep it from him, so when I come back next term I don’t want to see you so often.’

‘So often?’ queried Prem Nath. ‘How often have you seen me now, dearest? This is the second time you have been with me alone, the fourth time only that you have been in this room, and outside the flat we have only met twice. Is that often?’

‘I feel as though I had always known you,’ said Videhi. ‘I feel as though we had always been closely linked together. You are part of my mind, my soul. I do not count the times we have been together, Prem Nath, for they have been eternity, timeless and full of bliss.’

‘My dear,’ said Prem Nath, ‘you should not say that. You embarrass me. You don’t know how unworthy I am.’

‘I love you,’ said Videhi. ‘Is not that enough?’ and she smiled at him.

Slowly he pulled her towards him, and she came with fresh open lips and they kissed again, their thirsty mouths unquenchable.

‘You must let me breathe,’ said Videhi, drawing a little away. ‘You must let me live, beloved. I will kiss you once more when I go, but not till then. Now you must listen to me. When I come back we must meet only occasionally. We must ration our love. You must let me finish my studies. It is not really very long, and we will both be together in Delhi, able to come to each other when the longing grows too intense, and by then my

sisters will be more settled, and I shall be able to earn money, and then, if you love me still . . .'

'What then?' said Prem Nath.

'Then, if you love me still and are brave enough, we can live together.'

'You are quite unafraid, Videhi?'

'There is no fear in my love, only you must continue to love me all the time, and when we are at last together you must not mind if that makes things sometimes hard socially.'

'My dear, it is I who should say all these things, not you.'

'You don't, Prem Nath. You just want to kiss me, and then everything else is forgotten. I don't mind the forgetting. I also want to kiss you, but I want to kiss you and have you for all my life, and for that we must think and consider. You see, Prem Nath, I am not really a good woman. In Hindu eyes I am shameless. I deserted the man who was married to me, and I have no shame in telling you that I love you. I love you so much, Prem Nath, that I have to hold myself back. We cannot afford to live together yet and you must help me. If I became your wife now my studies would stop. I would not be able to earn money. Money we need, it is the only weapon of defence we have against society. That is the only value of money, to defend one's private life against convention and custom when these are wrong or harsh or stupid. When we can both earn we can challenge society. Until then we must wait.'

'Darling,' said Prem Nath, 'you do not know how sweet you are, and how right you are. The desire in my blood is always there, but there is no need for such close restraint, Videhi.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I know that; but when I love you, Prem Nath, I want to love you always and completely.'

I want to be with you openly. Until we can live together, you my husband, I your wife, in our own eyes—until I can bear your child, your first child, willingly and without fear, I do not want to do anything else. I am ready to give myself freely to you, and to ask the same willing gift of you. But when we do, Prem Nath, when we do give ourselves to each it must be for always. I could not bear to go away from you after loving you.'

'Dear Videhi,' said Prem Nath, 'you make me ashamed. I never thought love so candid or so bold. We will wait for each other, we will plan our lives together. After all, it is in the tradition of great lovers to wait, and often to wait separated by time and cold seas. Between us there will be no such gulfs. I will work harder than ever now. I will put an end to my laziness. I will take to serious writing again. You will be proud of me some day, Videhi.'

'I am proud of you now,' said Videhi. 'I will write to you from Kashi. You must write to me. I shall tell you all about myself. And now, please, kiss me quickly.'

She got up from the chowki and stood in the middle of the room, waiting with a happy smile on her face and her arms outstretched to Prem Nath. He stood up and went to her, holding her by her back, pressing her face slightly upwards, feeling her body from foot to breast tight and firm against his. They kissed and remained locked in each other's arms, forgetful of the world, conscious only of the bliss of willing body close to willing body, each nerve and muscle finding its echo, all the pulses and warmth of each other's life thrilling into the other, their lips sucking out the sweetness of love, their whole frames trembling with delight. So lost to each other were they that they did not observe the entrance of Narayan or notice his presence; then with a shock they drew apart and stared at him all tense and angry.

'I came,' he said, 'to see Prem Lal and to ask him for

comfort, for I thought he was my friend. Bitter comfort indeed I get.'

'In what way,' said Prem Nath, 'am I not your friend?'

'In what way?' said Narayan. 'How can you be my friend? I came to tell you that I loved Videhi, and was miserable that she refused me. I see her with you, I see you together. I had not thought it possible of you, Prem Nath; and as for Videhi, it is unbelievable.'

'What is unbelievable?' asked Videhi. 'Tell me what is wrong? I love Prem Nath. Prem Nath loves me. You cannot help love, Narayan. You cannot blame it. Had you given us time we would have told you, but you gave us no chance.'

'You are a bad woman,' said Narayan. 'I can understand Prem Nath. He is a man. But you, why do you give yourself so cheaply?'

'You do not know what you are saying, Narayan,' said Videhi angrily. 'You are being unjust and unfair.'

'I want to be unjust and unfair,' said Narayan. 'Do you know what you have done to me? You have refused my love. That is bad enough and hard enough to bear, but you flaunt to my face your own behaviour. You think that is nothing.'

He broke down and sat on the chowki weeping. Videhi stood silent, looking at Narayan.

'Why do you look at me?' he cried. 'I never want to see you again. Why don't you go?'

Prem Nath motioned to Videhi and she left quietly.

Narayan got up when Videhi went out.

'I, too, shall go,' he said to Prem Nath. 'I shall never come here again. You have both betrayed me.'

'That is foolish talk,' said Prem Nath. 'There has been no betrayal.'

'I did not expect it of either of you,' said Narayan. 'I do not want to talk about it. There is an end to

friendship, an end to Videhi, and an end to you. I came to you unhappy, hoping for some comfort. I go away utterly desolate.'

'Not utterly desolate,' said Prem Nath. 'I forgive you being unfair in your speech. You have much left, Narayan. You have youth, you have your work, your ambitions, and you still have friends.'

'What are they when Videhi is lost?'

'We cannot help love, Narayan,' said Prem Lal. 'It happens. Life is very inconsequential. You cannot fight it, nor can you blame it on others. Blaming is just a foolish kind of protection, but it does not really protect. There is no justice in it, Narayan, you know that.'

'There is no justice in anything. I do not care any more about that. I shall never forget what I saw tonight, and, foolish or not, I shall never forgive you or Videhi.'

And with that he went out.

Videhi was worried that evening by thought of Narayan. She did not mind the harsh words he had spoken, for she knew to what extremes of unfairness emotion could drive one, and also she was buoyed up still by her own great happiness. She only hoped he would not tell Indira. She felt that both she and Prem Nath had lost Narayan. She did not want to lose Indira as well. Their love was so simple, and to each other it had brought happiness, yet to others close to them it meant shock and despair. It is not our love that has caused that, she told herself, only their inability to see our love as we see it. She did not want her friend to suffer in love. Yet how can it be love unless both love as we, Prem Nath and I, love? Then there is no hurt; all sorts of difficulties come, but no hurt. Thinking of Prem Nath and herself, she could not long dwell on Narayan or even on Indira. Somehow they must find their own way, somehow they will. Then she went on dreaming of Prem Nath and the hours—so

few as yet—that she had spent with him, and the future that they would have together. She was not ambitious for him, yet she saw success coming; but it was not the success she thought of, rather all the details of their life together: their surroundings, the lovely things they would gather around them, fine carpets, beautiful brass, paintings, and many books, and then some day their children. She blushed at that. I want them, she said to herself, but not so desperately. They can wait. There will be time for them, and she promised herself that she would see, however much she loved her children—and she would because they would be hers and Prem Nath's—that they would not come between her and her husband. These thoughts, too, passed and she was lost in the vague bliss of their love. Before she went to bed she wrote a short note to Prem Nath giving him her Kashi address and asking him to write to her:

‘ . . . I have had such happy dreams of you and I. I will tell you them some day, but now and in Kashi I shall need the support of your love, darling. Please write to me. I have no regrets and no fears.’

At home all was excitement and preparation for the wedding. Shubha and Shalini were happy to see Videhi again, and they were delighted with Indira's present.

‘You must write to her for us,’ said Shubha, ‘and I will enclose a short note.’

Shubha was quiet but very content, with a deep inward certainty. She clearly wanted the marriage, and there was in her case no dumb unwilling acceptance. Videhi asked about Vidur, the young man who was to marry Shubha.

‘He works in a bank here,’ said Shalini, ‘though his home is in Lucknow, but he will live here with

Shubha. They will not be far away. I shall not lose Shubha, and I shall be at hand to help her. We have already found a place for them, a little cottage in a nearby compound, only five minutes off. It has two rooms and a kitchen, and it will cost ten rupees a month. They will be able to manage, and he will get more as time goes on; he is getting ninety rupees now. It is enough for two young people, content with a simple life. We are not spending much on the wedding.'

'What is Vidur like?' said Videhi.

'He is sensible,' said Shalini, 'and I am sure he will be kind. He is not very modern, yet not very orthodox either, but he is eager to make Shubha happy. They will both be busy, and I am sure that before long they'll both love each other deeply. Love grows, you know, Videhi. They are not afraid of starting poor and they are not afraid of each other. I suppose that is the main thing. He is Marathi, of course, but he's been nearly all his life in the U.P., and intends to stay here. He and Shubha suit each other very well.'

Videhi loved to come back to Kashi. She felt so much at home there, although the environment was so different from Delhi. It seemed that things never changed. The little house where she was born was still the same, a lovely, pleasant refuge and haven. The books were still there, and the furniture, and her parents and her friends. Videhi helped her mother in the kitchen and she was glad she could be so useful. She had long talks with Shubha about life in Delhi.

'I half envy you,' said Shubha, 'but only half. My life here is going to be good. It has been good.'

'I am sure it will be,' said Videhi.

Shubha took her to the house where she was going to live. She knew it quite well. One side of it looked on to the main road, and all the windows here were wooden

shuttered. The other side fronted a big compound with lawns, and trees, mango, lemon, lime and guava. Just in front of the little house was a row of jasmin bushes. It was secluded and pretty. They did not need much to start with. Shalini was giving Shubha two of her beds and some kitchen things, and they were going to buy a chowki, a bookcase and some curtains. Gradually they would get all they wanted. Videhi met Vidur. He was a quiet boy, several years older than Shubha. He was obviously a little in awe of Videhi, who was studying medicine in Delhi, and there was a certain amount of pride mingled with the awe which pleased both the sisters.

Videhi wrote a letter to Prem Nath. She had promised herself first that she would wait for his to come, but she could not wait. She wanted to write to him, for, in that writing, she felt closer to him.

‘Dearest,

My sister’s wedding is over. It was happy and they will be happy. But all the time I was thinking not really of them but of us, and the time when we can be married, when we can live together. Although we cannot have a real marriage in the legal sense yet, we will have a private one promising ourselves to each other for life, and giving ourselves to each for life. Dear heart, when I think of that my pen stops. Write to me quickly, my beloved. I want so much to hear from you. Nothing else matters but our love. With it, I challenge life. Nothing can defeat us. I love you and love you.

Videhi.’

The day after the wedding was over and the two young people had gone to their new home, Shalini sat with Videhi and Ganesh in their own little garden.

‘We have been so busy with Shubha,’ said Shalini, ‘we have not had time to ask about your life at Delhi.’

‘I write to you every week,’ said Videhi. ‘There is really nothing further to tell. My studies progress, you know my friends.’

‘Why don’t you ask Indira to spend some time here next holidays?’ said Shalini. ‘Now that Shubha has gone there will be more room, and, if need be, we could send one of the children to live with Shubha for that period if you think we would still be overcrowded.’

‘I would love to, Mother,’ said Videhi, ‘but . . .’

‘You have always described Indira as a simple girl,’ said Shalini. ‘She knows we are poor. She would not mind the way we live, and it would be nice for you to have your friends here.’

‘Yes,’ said Videhi. ‘I’ll ask her, but I am not certain that she will be able to come.’

‘Have you written to her yet?’ asked Shalini.

‘No. I will tomorrow perhaps.’

‘I would like to meet her,’ said Shalini. ‘Each time you come back from Delhi you look different, Videhi, richer, fuller. I would like to meet someone who knows you there.’

‘I am sure I don’t change at all,’ said Videhi. ‘I feel just the same.’

‘When you left Kashi first,’ said Shalini, ‘you were quiet, unhappy and tense, but now the unhappiness has gone and there is no tension and you look more than ever beautiful. Vidur’s people were surprised. They thought Shubha was the only beauty in the family, but when they saw you they realised they were mistaken, and they were very happy to discover you, Videhi. They are greatly impressed. They look on you already as a doctor.’

‘Vidur,’ said Ganesh, ‘called you a second Portia, and when I told that to Shubha she was most pleased. But you have not visited our friends in Delhi this term.’

‘No, Father, we are so busy. There are all the lectures and so much extra work to do if we are to do well. Medicine is not easy.’

‘I am sure you are working very hard,’ said Ganesh, ‘but you must not overdo it.’

And so through the evening they talked and Videhi felt how good it was to be home.

Next day she received two letters: one from Prem Nath that she had been waiting for so anxiously, and one from Indira, which she opened first. Indira had written:

‘My dear Videhi,

It is so lonely and dull here in Bombay. I miss every moment Delhi and the work we do there, and the friends we have there, and above all you. I want so much to talk to someone who knows me, who really knows me, but here it is impossible. I envy you your sisters and your home. Do write and tell me about Shubha and the wedding and give them all my love; that is, all the love I have for my friends. I am so unhappy, Videhi. I thought Narayan would have written to me. Even a formal letter I would welcome from him. You must think me very bad, but I love him, Videhi, and I wonder why he does not see it, and I want desperately to tell him. In Delhi it is all right. We meet so often with our work, and we can talk, and although it is always about our work and never personal I do not mind. I can see him, and be near him, and I know that I am helping him. Here in Bombay the loneliness is dreadful. I think of him and I am fretted with loneliness. Please write and comfort me. Please tell me you do not think I am bad to write like this to you about Narayan. Why is love so hard, Videhi? Surely, if one person falls in

love the other must respond, or is that why they say love is blind? Whatever you think of me, write to me at once. I want these holidays to end quickly. I know it is not really long before we'll all be back again in Delhi, but I cannot wait even that time without some words of comfort which you must give me.

Your very loving friend,
Indira.'

Videhi sighed and wondered what she could write, then, forgetting Indira, she took out Prem Nath's letter. He began:

'Dearest,

Thank you for your note from the hostel. I would have written at once, but I had to go to Simla to attend a government conference for the Press, and when I got there I found I had left your note with your address behind. I am afraid you will find me very careless. I will grow out of it. I have always been rather lazy and selfish because I have had nothing greatly to care for. My work interested me at first, but one soon gets disillusioned with journalism, and my interest in politics, though sincere, has been a kind of protection against an inner emptiness. All that has changed now. I cannot forget your sweet words to me on our last night together. I did not know one could be so bold and beautiful and tender and sensible. I would like to write to you a poet's letter, but I have no poetry, only the vision of it. I see you in my room telling me you love me, the light in your eyes radiant and beautiful, and the grace of your body so firm and so yielding and so unafraid. I would like to write you a passionate letter, but the passion within me burns all words away, and to write

your name alone, Videhi, is enough to evoke storm in my blood, the storm that brings refreshing rain, the lightning that shows the imperishable beauty of the world. All sorts of hopes surge up within me. I feel I shall go back to the dreams of my youth and write again. I wanted to write such a novel that all the world would look to it and recognise it as something great and distinctive and in the splendid Indian tradition that gave us the Upanishads and the paintings in Ajanta and the temples of the south. Now I feel I can. I could write a novel about ourselves today, the microcosm of politics and scandal and hope and ambition that is in Delhi, the mirror of the new India that is coming to birth. I would not expose. I have passed the mood of indignation at the myriad meannesses in our lives. I would paint and portray, and show how, despite everything, every failing, every sign of viciousness, every example of corruption or stupidity or greed or selfishness, all together make a living whole, a worthwhile whole, a splendid thing. Or another dream I have had is to tell the story of that wonderful temple, Konarak, by the lonely Orissa shore. It is so magnificent, so rich in symbols of love. It is a profusion of love, it is India's most splendid monument to love. I would show how it was built, what fears and hopes possessed the architects, what tales of bliss or woe lay behind each carved embrace, what legends from our past it contains, and what suffering transfigured it embodies; and into this you would come. Every woman in love in the countless sculptures would be you, Videhi. Not only the carvings outside, but the temple itself and its core and heart would be you. And every man or god embraced would be myself. This poem in stone with its thousand warm physical embraces, its thousand

passionate acts, I would convert into a poem in words that would shock and thrill and bewitch the world. I have always loved that dark temple. Now I love it the more. Some day I shall take you there, and when we have filled ourselves with the wonders in stone we shall look at the sea at night and drink of its deep beauty and mystery; and when we are tired of the still stone and the cold moving sea and the light of the stars we will fill ourselves with each other's love, and to that there can be no end. Or I would go further back into our past, Videhi, and write again in modern words the story of Sita or Draupadi, for now I know Sita and Draupadi. The tale is familiar and the woman you. I would weave it again in a pattern so rich and sweet that the world would think it new. Dear heart, these are not just dreams. I can, I will make them, and I will give them to you as an offering, the humble offering—no, not humble—the proud offering of your lover,

Prem Nath.'

Videhi read through the letter several times, each time more happy than the last. He had said nothing about Narayan, but what was Narayan to them at that moment? She thought she would answer Indira at once and get that finished with. Prem Nath's answer she would keep within her so that she could enjoy it the longer and the more. She looked at Indira's letter again and wrote rapidly:

'My dear Indira,

Thank you so much for writing to me. The wedding itself went off very well and everybody is content. Shubha was delighted with your sari and she will be writing to you herself shortly to thank you. Some

people are not very good at writing letters, you know. They delay so long. I am sure Narayan will write to you if he has your address. Do not worry. I will not say any more now but keep it all for Delhi.

Your loving friend,
Videhi.'

She began to day-dream about Delhi and recalled visually to her imagination and memory the places there that she knew so well and that she loved: the hostel with its compound and its lovely trees, especially the flowering flame of the forest that blossomed in the hot weather, and filled the air with scarlet; her room in the hostel with its neat white bed and her few books; the lecture-rooms and the demonstration theatre in which she spent so much time; the roads and streets of New Delhi with its great circle of shops and its crowds of clerks going to and from the government offices, and the streets lit at night so delicate and colourful; the Purana Kila and the wide sweep of the plains round Delhi; and the places where she had met Prem Nath, and particularly his room. When she closed her eyes she could see every detail, the sunbeams striking the books and the patterns on the chowki covers. She could see the busy station at which so soon she would arrive again: its noise and clamour, its crowds and smells and colours, the movement of jostling humanity, the porters with their torn red clothes and their great brass badges, and the lines of tongas, ekkas and taxis outside. All this was Delhi, and every bit of it was acceptable to her. To nothing did she, could she, take exception. Delhi had become her second home, a richer home because there she had met Prem Nath. To Delhi's seven cities she would add an eighth, the paradise made by herself and Prem Nath. She sighed with contentment.

Chapter Twenty

HER MOTHER called her.

'We are going now to Shubha's,' she said.
'Are you ready, Videhi?'

Shalini and Videhi were going together; their first, as it were, slightly formal visit. Shubha would be alone. Vidur had started work again at the bank. 'We do not need a honeymoon, all our life will be a honeymoon,' he had said. Shubha was waiting for them at the door of her little house. 'Prem Kuti,' she called it, the home of love. It was the first time she had been a hostess, the first time she was welcoming her mother and sister as guests to her home. It was an auspicious occasion for her and a happy day for Shalini. Shubha had put on the thin mauve georgette sari that Indira had sent her, and with her youth and grace she looked very pretty.

'Please come in, Mother,' she said, 'and you, too, Videhi.'

Inside the main room was one chowki with a golden-coloured spread. The floor was stone-paved and freshly washed, and on it were two new and vivid-coloured straw mats. A little table was spread with tea-things, and on a bookshelf were a few of Vidur's books and some photos. Perfume was burning from a small silver holder. The thin grey strands of smoke enriched the air, and on a saucer lay half a dozen unopened jasmin buds. Videhi and Shalini left their sandals outside.

'How charming you have made it,' said Videhi.

'And all this,' pointing to the sweets, 'you have cooked yourself?'

'Yes,' said Shubha.

‘This is very good,’ said Shalini. ‘Your little house is splendid. And you are quite happy yourself?’

‘Yes, Mother,’ said Shubha.

‘And Vidur?’ asked Shalini.

‘We are both happy,’ said Shubha. ‘We cannot ask for more.’

‘What time will he be back?’ asked Videhi.

‘About six,’ was the answer.

‘Some day,’ said Shalini, ‘you will know the joy I feel, when you, too, are able to go to your daughter’s house and find her happy and set up so well.’

‘That will be a long time yet,’ said Shubha.

‘Besides, you might have all sons,’ laughed Videhi.

‘No,’ said Shubha. ‘I will have one daughter at least—I hope more, but at least one. I cannot imagine a home without daughters, and I cannot imagine a daughter without sisters.’

‘Ganesh and I will be very happy when your child arrives,’ said Shalini. ‘You know, your first home together before the children come is very sweet. There are just the two of you, and you feel especially close and private. When the first child comes, the nature of home changes, and the sweetness gives place to a richness. You are never alone then, Shubha, but though you may have many more troubles you do not mind.’

They talked for a little longer and then they all looked at the house again, the kitchen and the one bedroom. It was neat and clean and simple.

‘Vidur is going to get a servant to help me,’ said Shubha, ‘though I am sure I do not need one. The day is so long when he is away and I can do all the work myself.’

Then just before six they got ready to leave.

The next few days passed quietly. Videhi was reading some of the textbooks she had brought from Delhi,

and helping her mother. They went out to the bazaar each morning together.

'Shubha is happy,' said Shalini, 'and I can see that you are happy, too, though in a different way. I feel a little nervous at times. We have been so used to troubles and worries and illnesses that I have almost forgotten to enjoy a period of calm and ease, and I half look ahead to the cloud that may break.'

'You are not afraid, are you, Mother?' asked Videhi.

'Not afraid, but still a bit nervous. It is foolish of me. I would like some day to see you in a home of your own and content like Shubha.'

'That is not impossible,' said Videhi. 'Perhaps you will, Shalini.'

She had postponed writing to Prem Nath for some days, anxious to reply at length and yet also unwilling to reveal all her feelings on paper. In the end she had written a brief note:

'Dearest,

I have read and re-read your sweet letter until I know it by heart. I can only answer it by saying that I treasure every word of it. I cannot write like you, though I feel like you. I will be in Delhi soon. Happy as I am in peaceful Kashi, I look with longing to the return to you. Please don't write any more letters here. I will send you a note as soon as I am in Delhi, and you must let me know if I can see you.

Your loving
Videhi.'

The journey back to Delhi was one of the happiest she had known. She hardly saw the crowds or the jostle; and though she stared at the changing landscape and wondered at the lives of the villagers working in the fields and at the women at the well or outside their own huts, and

marvelled at the crimson banks of cloud as the sun set, all this went on like a picture she saw but did not notice. Her heart was full of Prem Nath and the long weeks ahead in Delhi. She was glad all the time. Mixed with her delight was the determination she had come to study harder than ever, to make real progress in her work. She felt now that every step she took would bring her nearer to the future she dreamed of with Prem Nath. At last Delhi came, and she was in the tonga, and then in her room. She was still in a dream unpacking her boxes when Meenakshi came to her room.

'Here's a letter for you,' she said. 'It was in the office as I came through. And how have you been, Videhi? You did not write at all.'

'You did not write either,' said Videhi. 'What did you do with yourself?'

'I was in Bombay.'

'Didn't you go home then?'

'No,' said Meenakshi, 'I stayed with Ram Singh. He took me to Poona and we went over the film studios together. I met some of the producers. We had a glorious time. When I've finished this year I am going on the films. They heard me sing and they liked me.'

'What about your people? What did you tell them?'

'They thought I was staying with a friend, and so I was. You are not going to scold me, are you?'

'No, Meenakshi, no scolding. Was Ram Singh with you all the time?'

'Yes. I was so sorry when the holidays ended. We'll see each other in Delhi, of course, but it is not the same here. I shall be glad when I am working, then I can be really independent.'

'You are independent now, Meenakshi. I have never met anyone so free and unafraid. Doubt or worry never seems to trouble you.'

‘Why should they?’ asked Meenakshi. ‘People make life difficult and imagine problems. Thank goodness I’ve got no imagination. You, too, are free, Videhi, for all your reserve. You must not tell Indira about my being in Bombay with Ram Singh.’

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘not if you don’t wish. Aren’t you going to tell her yourself?’

‘No,’ said Meenakshi. ‘Ram Singh is very nice. He still believes in socialism and all that. He wants to carry on with it. I would not like Indira to be further disillusioned. She thinks love and socialism cannot mix. It does not hurt me or Ram Singh, but it might upset her.’

‘Are you so sure?’ asked Videhi.

‘Sure of what?’ said Meenakshi.

‘That Indira believes love and socialism don’t mix?’ said Videhi.

‘Yes,’ said Meenakshi. ‘Indira would never fall in love with a man, only with a book or an idea. Don’t let me keep you from your letter. I can see you are impatient to open it.’

Prem Nath had written to ask her to see him the first evening she got back. ‘Come straight to my flat,’ he said. ‘I’ll be waiting at seven.’

She was there promptly and Prem Nath opened his arms to kiss her.

‘It has been so long,’ he said.

‘You have flowers in the room,’ said Videhi as soon as she could speak, ‘and you have a new chowki cover.’

‘I wanted my room to look less of a den and more fit for you,’ said Prem Nath. ‘But let us not talk about flowers and chowki covers. Now that you are here, back with me, they are nothing, though till you came I thought of them and wondered if you would notice them. Darling, I love you.’

He kissed her again, and she kissed him back.

'Dear Prem Nath,' she said, 'I, too, have waited for this,' and again they kissed.

Then she said, 'Now let us rest and talk sitting quietly together.'

'My heart is never quiet near you, Videhi,' said Prem Nath, 'nor away from you. Quietness has gone. I have bought something for you as well.'

He showed a black silk Madrassi sari with a deep gold border.

'That is lovely,' said Videhi. 'I'll wear that for you one day when you have been very good. Now you must sit down and tell me all you have done since we left each other. The interval seemed so long, but now it is just as though it were yesterday.'

'I'll bring you some coffee first,' said Prem Nath.

He brought it in and poured out a cup for her, and then sat near her on the chowki with his hand on hers.

'Tell me first all that you have done, Videhi.'

'I have seen my sister married, I have helped with home, I have read your letter many times, and I've studied for some short time, and every night, dearest, I have dreamed of you, and that has been more than enough,' said Videhi.

'Tell me about your dreams,' said Prem Nath.

'No,' said Videhi, 'not now. They are real now,' and she turned to him and kissed him quickly and then drew back.

'Tell me about your sisters,' said Prem Nath. 'Are they all like you?'

'Yes, of course,' said Videhi. 'Shubha, my sister who has just married, comes next after me. I think she will be very happy. She is very loving. I won't say she has simpler tastes than mine, but she loves the quiet domestic life more positively than I do. She has been lucky in her marriage, though I still feel she is very young for it. She is also beautiful.'

'All your sisters must be beautiful—you need not tell me that,' said Prem Nath.

Videhi laughed. 'I shall, all the same,' she said. 'Then there is Vasanti. She is fifteen. She is still at school. She is clever and artistic. She likes dancing.'

'Do you dance?' asked Prem Nath.

'No,' said Videhi. 'I loved it. I used to watch them often. That was as near as I got. I never learnt myself. You'll soon discover I have none of the accomplishments.'

'Sufficient,' said Prem Nath, 'to win the world's love; sufficient to make one always want to kiss you like this,' and he kissed her hard and long, holding her backwards so that she was lying on the chowki.

'Let me go,' said Videhi, smiling. 'You are not being good.'

She stood up and tidied her sari.

'And now,' she said, 'Prem Nath, you must behave,' and she sat down again a little way from him, but holding his hand and smiling at him as she talked.

'I was telling you about Vasanti when you interrupted. She is very like Shubha. I remember them so well as children. Then there is Sakuntala. She's the youngest of my sisters. Everyone says she is going to be like me. She is more serious than either Shubha or Vasanti. Both those are naturally happy and send out their happiness. Sakuntala is quieter and more reserved. Perhaps it was the way she was brought up, for after her comes Vishnu. He's nine now, the only son, and a little spoilt. Sakuntala was brought up in his shadow, and may have felt it. Children know things adults never dream of. As we grow older we grow less sensitive, I think.'

'Sometimes that is true,' said Prem Nath. 'We find being sensitive hurts and we protect ourselves.'

'Well,' said Videhi, 'those are my family. Next

time I come I will bring you a photo of them. We had one taken this holiday. We have always been too poor to afford little things like that often. All my education is paid for by scholarships and my old school. That is one other reason why I want to complete my studies, so that some day I may earn and repay them.'

'Of course,' said Prem Nath. 'That will come. I, too, know poverty. It can hurt dreadfully, but in the end one comes to disregard it. Yet I am glad you are poor, Videhi. Had you been rich I would not have known what to do. You would have said you did not mind, but I would have hated it. Being by myself, I have never worried. I have always had enough for myself, and my books and my work. Don't let's talk of money any more. One thing you must promise me.'

'Yes,' said Videhi.

'It is nothing serious,' said Prem Nath. 'It is just that I want a really good photo of you. You must go to that shop in Connaught Circus and get one taken.'

'I'll wear your black sari,' said Videhi. 'But you have not told me about your work. Have you begun yet?'

'Yes,' said Prem Nath. 'As soon as I had written to you I started to make a rough draft. It will be a novel about modern times and mainly based on Bombay and Delhi. I was brought up in Bombay. I know it well. I shall use my own background and lead up to conditions in Delhi today; it will be a study of conditions rather than of plot, though there will be a plot.'

'You have not told me about yourself,' said Videhi. 'Tell me how you were when you were a boy, and about your family, and what you have done in Delhi.'

'The novel will tell you that, dearest, though really there is so little to tell. I was very ordinary as a child and a boy. I still am. In many ways I am a failure. I had lots of promise when I was young, but I've never lived

up to it. I only got my present job through my uncle. I think I told you. It was really an accident. I wanted to be an artist, an intellectual, a creator, but I could not, not then, with only youth and no experience; but I never thought earlier on that I'd be a journalist. I'll show you that in my novel—how out of a very commonplace, casual, normal background a boy grows up, and then discovers himself, as he discovers the world, this India of ours with all its problems.'

'And is he going to solve these problems?' asked Videhi.

'No,' said Prem Nath, 'I cannot, and he cannot; but he will think he finds solutions and then he will fall in love.'

'You have not told me yet,' said Videhi softly, 'what you know about falling in love.'

'What do I know?' asked Prem Nath. 'Oh, I see,' he laughed. 'I know everything, my dear. I have fallen in love with you. It comes suddenly, unexpectedly, freshly like rain. It is an accident, yet it is predestined from eternity.'

'I mean,' said Videhi, 'have you ever been in love before?'

'No,' said Prem Nath. 'No, my dear one, I have not. Love I have never known before. When I was young and at college the women I dreamed about were in books and poetry.'

'And have you never kissed anyone before?' asked Videhi.

Prem Nath flushed.

'That is not quite the same thing, my dear. I don't like to tell you, but I know you will understand. You see, I have gone to women.'

'Did you like it?' asked Videhi.

'They kept their bargain,' said Prem Nath. 'If you promise not to hate me, I will tell you.'

‘How could I hate you, Prem Nath? Kiss me now and tell me how I could hate you.’

‘My dear, you don’t make it easy for me. I would sooner tell you first, but then you may never want to kiss me again.’

Saying this he kissed her fully, surprised at the strength of her embrace and delighted with her physical demand.

‘Darling,’ he said, when they broke free, ‘do you still want me to go on?’

‘Of course,’ said Videhi, ‘and then I shall kiss you once again, and you will know whether there is any difference.’

‘Well,’ said Prem Nath, ‘it is not really much. I am half ashamed of all these preliminaries, but I am also ashamed of what I have to say, but I must after having said so much. I am not trying to excuse myself, Videhi. I am trying to show you my nature. And Indian prostitutes are not just common, they are talented and highly trained, and gifted in all sorts of ways.’

‘Would it make any difference,’ said Videhi, ‘if they were common?’

‘No,’ said Prem Nath, ‘I don’t suppose it would. I have been to them when I was younger. It is not the same as love at all. But does it hurt you, Videhi? Are you ashamed of me?’

‘No,’ said Videhi. ‘I am glad you told me. Even with a woman there may be moments of desire. We give our lives when we give our love, and we want nothing less in return. Now kiss me again.’

‘No,’ said Prem Nath. ‘You are angry with me and want to hide your anger in a kiss. I want you not to be angry, dear. You have fallen in love with a man, and I have many weaknesses. You must learn not to mind them.’

‘And you, too, Prem Nath,’ said Videhi, ‘have fallen in love with a woman, not with a stone or a dream.’

She went to him and kissed him as he sat down, kneeling at his feet, and pressing herself against his knees, happy to feel the hard strength of his bones, happy to seek his mouth and give him all her sweetness, happy to hold her body so close against his. Slowly he relaxed from a state of tension and then he stood up, lifting her with him, and closer still they held each other tight, kissing again and again until the lips were tired, and then they sat down, holding each other loosely and quietly. Videhi leaned against him, her eyes filmed over, her body warm, and all the softness and the perfume poured upon him. She touched his face gently, passing her hand over his head and neck, and then took his hand and put it on her breast.

'Now do you think I am angry with you?' she said. 'Shall I kiss you again? Shall I make you think me shameless? Do you think you have hurt me?'

'My darling,' said Prem Nath, 'we are supposed to be sensible.'

'Who is not sensible?' said Videhi. 'It is you with your ridiculous fears. Now go on with your story.'

'Well,' said Prem Nath, 'I have got the plan written down here. I am working on a chronological basis, and against the blocks of years I have noted incidents. They are just to remind me of things that I know.'

'What is all this at the end?' said Videhi, holding the paper he had given her. 'You have just written my name many times. Did you think you would forget that?'

'No,' said Prem Nath, smiling, 'that is you. You come into the story. Whatever my pen touches you come out. I want to write about you, but all I can find is your name, Videhi, that to me is a key-word to paradise.'

'It won't mean much to your readers,' said Videhi.

'No,' said Prem Nath, 'not just like that, but it will when they read the book; then it will mean to them what

it means to me. The boy will become immersed in ideas, and then he will meet you. Two other people in the book will fall in love with you, perhaps three. One will be a politician with an already established reputation, a brilliant lawyer in the courts and a gifted orator in politics, and he will fall in love with you passionately. Then there will be a rich industrialist, a powerful man of a sensual nature with a luxurious house in Delhi, another in Ahmedabad where his mills are. He is a man already married, and who has had and still has mistresses. He, too, will love you. And with all these three there will be slightly different sets of problems. I will intermingle them so that they meet through you. To the young man it will be either complete disillusionment with the ideals of freedom-loving youth, the realisation that India's path to freedom and liberty is beset with cruelty, corruption and suffering for the innocent, and your love, or else the retention of his ideals by an effort of the intellectual will coupled with loss of you. To the lawyer it will be the annihilation of his ambitions and love with you or else success and loneliness. And to the third man, the industrialist, will come the temptation to murder his wife in order to live with you. Somehow, that is the dilemma you will force on all of them.'

'And what do I do?' said Videhi. 'What is my name that I deal out such destruction? Am I another Sitala Mayi? Have I no choice or desires myself?'

'Yes, yes,' said Prem Nath. 'Love for you leads these men to think like this, and in the statement of their cases I shall be able to describe so many things that I know. It will not end tragically or with melodrama. Neither exist in life.'

'Pain exists,' said Videhi, 'and suffering.'

'Yes, of course,' said Prem Nath, 'but in life they do not make a tragic pattern. It is only the imagination

writing to blunt the edge of pain that makes them tragic. In my novel I shall show how you make clear to each of these separately that their understanding of the problem is wrong, that there are no clear and obvious alternatives, and that they can accept you without destruction and love you without loss. The lawyer will not believe you. In spite of all his cleverness he is a fool, and he will ruin himself.'

'I can see your story,' said Videhi, laughing, 'but not very clearly. It is like looking at the pattern in a beautiful old carpet from a distance. You know it is rich and intricate in design, but you cannot describe it. I know you can do it, Prem Nath, but you must not get mixed up with the Videhi of the book and the real Videhi.'

'There is only one Videhi, darling, and her I cannot forget,' said Prem Nath.

'Oh dear,' cried Videhi, 'look at the time. I must go.'

'Let me wrap up your sari,' said Prem Nath, and as he gave it to her he kissed her gently. 'Good night, sweetest,' he said. 'Come back tomorrow.'

'No,' said Videhi, 'you forget our resolve. Not tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow even. I'll come back in a week's time, Prem Nath. We must both work. But if you want me desperately, very, very much, but only then, write to me and I shall come.'

'I'll write to you at once,' said Prem Nath, laughing.

'No,' said Videhi. 'One short week, sweetheart, and then we'll come together again,' and she kissed him passionately.

When she got back to her room Indira was sitting there waiting for her.

'You are so late, Videhi. I was getting quite worried. I came over to see you and I waited for you. I could not imagine where you had gone.'

‘There is no need to worry,’ said Videhi, holding the parcelled sari behind her so that Indira should not see it.

‘But there is,’ said Indira. ‘The girls are all saying that there may be riots in Delhi again soon. They say a Hindu girl has been taken off to a Muslim house—you know these rumours. It is probably untrue, but it is enough to lead to trouble.’

‘Every year,’ said Videhi, ‘we have these riots. They are like plague and cholera, they are always with us.’

‘Yes, but we can take precautions against both. We need not be out when there is talk of riot in the air, especially at night and alone.’

‘Did you have a good holiday?’ asked Videhi, anxious to change the subject and forgetting for the moment the letter Indira had written. Indira did not notice.

‘I was miserable—miserable all the time. I am so glad to be back in Delhi with someone I can talk to, and to be able to see Narayan again, though I feel that if he is so cold towards me I should not meet him; but I want so much, Videhi. You know, there was a time when I thought love silly and romantic. Then I thought that love was something natural and easy that one could absorb freely and frankly without interfering in any way. I thought if one was brave enough and enlightened enough there could be free and happy love between people—love that one could welcome easily and love that one could forget easily. Now I am learning that love is nothing but pain and longing and it destroys the will and breaks the mind. Tell me, Videhi, tell me that I am wrong.’

‘Of course you are wrong, dear,’ said Videhi. ‘Just wait a while and you will see.’

‘You must tell me about Kashi and yourself. You promised, Videhi.’

‘Not now, please. It is late, and I am still tired with the

travelling. Let us sleep now, Indira, and tomorrow I will tell you and we'll get back to our books. I did so little study during the holidays. I had meant to do a lot. And in the evening we will have a long gossip.'

'Yes,' said Indira, getting up. 'Good night, Videhi. Thank you. You don't know what it is to have a friend like you. Good night.'

The next two or three days the girls were busy with their studies. This was the last term of their pre-clinical work. Next term they would start in the wards, and they were keen to approach that time. Indira was happy. She had received a note from Narayan. He said he had been upset, but he was glad now to be back in Delhi, to be able to carry on the research work together, and to know that in her he had a faithful friend. It was the most personal letter Narayan had so far written to her, and she was very happy reading her longing into it. She was going to see him in a week's time at the next meeting of their society. She talked about this to Videhi, and Videhi hoped that good would come of it.

Chapter Twenty-one

MEANWHILE the rumours about Hindu-Muslim ill-feeling grew and there were reports of occasional incidents in Old Delhi and in some of the other cities of the United Provinces. Every year this happened and there were a few deaths and some grim isolated cases of brutality, but sometimes the violence flared up on a large scale. All the fears now suggested a major outbreak, and the girls in the hostel talked about it. The fifth night of term what was feared

and expected happened. There were stabbings in the dark old lanes of the city, shops were pillaged and set fire to, young girls were taken away, and harmless poor people beaten and terrified. Fires broke out and the panic spread within the city. The police were called out and then the troops. All the power of the government was exerted to quell the disturbance; and power being matched against power, the overwhelmingly superior strength of the government rapidly won. In a few hours the city was quiet and the fires smouldered down, but the streets were deserted save for the soldiers on patrol, and within the houses sat fear, black and horrible. Rumour carried the tales everywhere. Neighbour whispered them to neighbour, servant to master, and they were magnified and multiplied in the telling. Shocking and brutal as the actual events were, the numbing terror and the deep, searing, dark, passive fear and hatred that followed were even worse. Shops remained closed. Schools were shut. People would not move out of their houses. The authorities' one concern now was to force the return of confidence, and the restoration of normal life, lest people should starve or worse, for they feared that the close confinement would breed disease in the squalor of the lanes, disease that would strike indiscriminately at Hindu or Moslem, rich or poor, brown or white.

New Delhi was safe from any violence, but the college authorities were nervous and the girls were kept in their hostel. It might be a week before freedom came back and they could go outside to the medical lecture halls. Videhi suddenly realised that she would not be able to see Prem Nath as they had planned. It was Indira that set Videhi off. She began to talk and wonder if Narayan were safe. Videhi said he must be. He was a student and he would be in his own college as they were. Then she thought within

herself, but what of Prem Nath? He is a journalist. He has to move about. Perhaps he has gone to the riot areas of the city. She knew he was not a news reporter, but she could not tell whether or not he would go out merely, to see or perhaps to accompany a colleague. The danger was real, a sudden stab, a sudden shot, and the innocent victim fell. She could not sleep for worrying about Prem Nath. They could feel, even in their compound, the deathly silence that oppressed the city. Hour dragged after weary hour and there was no end to it. The people in the hostel began to be worried about their food supply. Luckily, as it was the beginning of term, they had a good stock of rice and grains, but fresh vegetables and milk had ceased, for the villagers would not come to the markets, nor were the town middlemen at the markets to buy. Even worse than the lack of fresh food was the absence of the sweepers, who stayed in their squalid huts and refused to come. The physical distress caused to the girls was considerable.

None of these things touched Videhi. She was thinking only of Prem Nath and the dangers that might beset him. Images appeared before her of Prem Nath lying in the garbage of the gutter with the blood oozing from a stab wound; of Prem Nath on the ground with his head beaten in by one of those huge iron-shod sticks the Pathans carried; of Prem Nath with his eyes closed in death and a bullet wound in his chest. All these things she knew had actually happened to others in the riots. They could happen to Prem Nath, and not only the clean wound or the sudden shot, but the dreadful, horrible mutilations and savagery, the stock-in-trade of Indian terror, hints of which were passed from girl to girl: of men and women with their abdomens ripped open, of legs and hands and feet cut off—terrible things, and behind these even more unspeakable atrocities.

Videhi was consumed with anguish. She wrote to Prem Nath:

‘Dearest,

Please tell me that you are well and safe. Such dreadful tales are told here, and I know some of them must be true. Let me know you are safe, and do not go where danger is, I beg you. I am so worried, Prem Nath, sick with fear. Send word at once that you are well, and promise me not to take any risks. At once, please.

Videhi.’

She posted it, and then she wondered whether the letter would reach him. Thankfully she learnt that the postal services were working. That same day there was a slight relaxation in the tension in the city. The Commissioner had ordered the shops to be opened. The next day servants began to trickle back to their masters and some traffic moved about in the daylight. There was still curfew at night, but in the day there was a slow return to normal. New Delhi was lucky and saw its sweepers and fresh vegetables back first. The hostel authorities and the girls were glad. ‘In two days,’ said the warden, ‘you may go to your lectures. But you must not go alone, and no-one will be allowed out yet in the evenings. We do not want to lose anyone.’ That same day Videhi had a letter from Prem Nath. He wrote:

‘My darling,

I was so happy to receive your letter and so sad to learn that you are worried. I knew, of course, that you would be safe in your hostel. I have seen more of these riots than you, and I am ashamed to say that I have grown callous to them, though they are our deepest blot. I have been busy each day in the news-

paper office, and each night in my flat with my novel. New Delhi is always safe. I went once with some police officers who are my friends into Old Delhi just to see. There was nothing there except deserted streets. The dead had been taken away by the military. The wounded are in hospitals. These riots are sickening. Some frenzied fanatic or criminal commits murder or arson, and a dozen others rise to emulate him. Government steps in and shoots down the innocent, and the guilty sneak away into their mohullas to emerge again some other insane time, and so quiet is restored. The fear remains and the hatred. What worries the authorities now most is the outbreak of disease. It need not worry us. I will write daily to you until you are at liberty to see me. I will work hard at my novel, and then the sun and life will shine again for us in each other's arms.

You know, Videhi, all these unhappy days for Delhi I have had no thoughts but of you—not that I was afraid for you as you were afraid for me, but thoughts of longing for you. I did not think at all about the dead or the unhappy wounded and those left behind to mourn. I thought of you. I think of you. Night and day, Videhi, you are in my thoughts; and though these are mostly happy thoughts, the intense concentration brings on an ache of physical longing to which I know there can be no relief but of writing to you—and that adds, not lessens. The thought breeds the desire, and the desire unsatisfied brings on acute pain, an aching, piercing longing. I try by hard work to conquer the ache, but it persists. I love the novel I have just begun because it is about you, though you have not yet appeared; but because it is about you I think of you, I see you, I recall your form, I feel again your kiss, I feel again your close embrace, and the fall

of your breast against mine. I could repeat all that a thousand times. I do to myself. I tell you all this, darling, so that you may know me. I am half ashamed, yet not wholly; for, loving you, who could be otherwise? I want to reveal my soul to you at its most painful as well as at its happiest. Meeting you, Videhi, and loving you has made me very happy, and I thank the gods for their kindness to me. I praise life, even the wretchedness of life in the riots of Delhi, because in you and in your love there is promise and certainty of heaven. Dear heart, keep well and happy, and write to me and do not worry.

Your everloving
Prem Nath.'

Videhi cried on reading the letter, and cried again through happiness. Mine the fear, she thought, and his the longing. How little you know of me, Prem Nath, to think that I have no longing, to think that I do not know the yearning ache of the body to hold you in my arms, to kiss you, to give myself to you. I will not tell you yet, for the longing untinged by fear and unsharpened by desperation is also sweet. I shall dream of you to-night, but I shall not tell you my dreams. She felt all the fear gone and was blissful again. She read his letter through once more, and this time smiled with joy. She wrote in answer:

'Dear Prem Nath,

Your letter was so sweet and welcome and has brought such relief to me. Write to me everything you feel, my own one, and tell me the progress you are making. We will be allowed to go out to lectures in a day or two but not in the evenings, so we must wait a little longer before we can meet. I love you.

Videhi.'

The next two days saw the girls back at work and at their lectures. It was a relief to be able to go out, and they welcomed the studies and the note-taking. It seemed long since Delhi was clouded with fear. They quickly forgot the terror of those few days and were looking forward to the time when they would be free to move about at night. Videhi was glad to have got over her sudden fear, and Indira was happy because Narayan had written again to her. He had explained they could not have their usual meetings on Saturdays until the ordinances were removed. 'That will be very soon now,' he wrote. 'Everyone says things will rapidly come back to normal, and then,' he added, 'I shall be glad to see you again, Indira. I have missed you greatly.' Such terms of affection were unusual from Narayan, and Indira was delighted. She went about in a dream, and Videhi was also happy, for she thought that now would happen what she had previously imagined. Indira spoke to her at night and told her how anxious she was to see Narayan again, just to see him, and she talked over with Videhi what they might do together if they married. She was not sure what Narayan would do, but thought he would go into law first and then politics. All his interests were that way.

'And then, when I have my practice,' she said, 'we'll be so happy each working at what we like, and both of us together. I want to buy a little house in the hills, one of those small bungalows amongst the apple orchards near Naini Tal. They are so lovely, and around about the hills are thickly wooded. We'll go there each summer, and you must come too, Videhi. Those orchards are quiet and peaceful. And when the rains come we'll have great log fires in the house and watch the flames leap upward and smell the fresh pine smell, and we'll have a room full of books, and we can shut ourselves off from the world for

a while. We must have some retreat like that, and there are none lovelier . . .’

‘You know Naini then?’ asked Videhi.

‘Yes,’ said Indira. ‘I have stayed there twice as a young girl. I have never forgotten.’

‘I went to the hills once,’ said Videhi. ‘They were not really the hills at all, but on the way towards them. I was five then, perhaps not even five. It was before my sisters were born. I can remember everything so clearly: the dusty road out of Dehra Dun, and the bright green freshness of the hills. I, too, would like to go back. I would like to go really high, to the snow and the ice and the glaciers, and beyond to Kailash. I have never yet seen snow.’

‘It’s such a nuisance not being able to go out at night.’ said Indira. ‘I’ll write a letter to Narayan if you don’t mind, Videhi. Shall I tell him of our dreams of the hills?’

‘If you wish,’ said Videhi, ‘but he might not understand yet.’

Indira wrote and asked Narayan to come near the hostel gates at midday:

‘. . . We can talk for a while, and there is so much to say that a letter is not long enough. Our plans for the survey have got sadly behind. I will wait for you, so please don’t disappoint me.’

Next day she went out to meet Narayan. She had not told Videhi. She had felt shy of revealing her sudden boldness in asking Narayan to come to see her. He was there at the time appointed.

‘We’ll just walk about,’ said Indira. ‘I wanted to ask you if we could not all meet in the daytime again. It is so long since we were together, and what with the holidays

and the disturbances caused by the riots our survey will be quite spoilt.'

'Whom do you mean by all?' asked Narayan.

'I mean you and I and Videhi and Prem Nath and Ram Singh. Surely we could meet at Prem Nath's flat. He would not mind, and in the daytime it will be quite easy for us to get there.'

'You don't know about Prem Nath then?'

'What is there to know?' asked Indira.

'I never want to see him again, Indira. I have been bitterly disappointed. I thought he was loyal, a colleague, a guide in our studies, a friend we could trust, but he is not. And as for Videhi, I have no words bad enough for her.'

Indira was astonished and indignant.

'How can you say that, Narayan? Videhi is my friend, my closest friend. You should not say that.'

'I would not say it without reason,' said Narayan, 'least of all to you. Perhaps you do not know your friend so well as I do. You should know what she is really like, how I found her. Last term, near the end, I went round to Prem Nath's flat in the evening. I found Videhi with him. They were kissing each other. They both said they were lovers. They must have been for long. They were quite unashamed, especially Videhi. I was shocked.'

'It is not true,' said Indira. 'I could not believe it of Videhi.'

'She is that man's mistress,' said Narayan harshly. 'They do not care about us, and the things we are working for. Whilst we have been intent on something decent and worth while they have been gross and selfish and together in his flat.'

'I still cannot believe it,' said Indira, 'and yet . . . But you have upset me, Narayan.'

'I am sorry for that, Indira,' said Narayan. 'I would not hurt you willingly. You see, I cannot meet either of them again. If I had not told you, you would not have understood. Perhaps I am old-fashioned and wrong-headed. I value womanhood. You understand me, Indira. You don't despise me for telling you?'

'No,' said Indira. 'Though I still find it hard to believe. I must get back now. See me tomorrow, please, Narayan.'

They had further lectures in the afternoon, and Indira did not speak to Videhi. In the evening she was still silent and brooding, obviously ill at ease and worried. Videhi asked her what the matter was.

'It is nothing,' said Indira.

'You seem so unhappy,' said Videhi, 'it cannot be nothing. Is it something to do with Narayan?'

'No, Videhi,' said Indira, 'not with Narayan. You see, I met him today, and he told me something about you, about you and Prem Nath, that I'd rather not believe.'

'What did he tell you?' asked Videhi quietly.

'He said you were Prem Nath's mistress. He does not want to meet either of you again.'

'And do you believe him?', asked Videhi.

'He said he saw you together in Prem Nath's flat, Videhi. He would not lie about a thing like that.'

'No,' said Videhi, 'I suppose not; but he is wrong, quite wrong. He would not dare to say that to my face, for he knows it is untrue.'

'What can I do, Videhi? I want to believe you, but how can I disbelieve Narayan?'

'I don't know,' said Videhi. 'You can ask him to repeat it to me if you like, and then perhaps you will know the truth.'

Indira said nothing more and both the girls pretended to study, but they were too upset to read and too

distressed to talk to each other. Indira could not reconcile the contradiction. Now that she was, as it were, coming close to Narayan for the first time on almost intimate terms she refused to feel that he could be wrong or bad. Yet she could not believe, either, that Videhi was so bad as to deserve Narayan's harsh condemnation. Videhi felt unhappy at what Narayan had said of her. Yet, she thought, it is better perhaps than that Indira should learn that he has loved me. I suppose he wants to hurt me. But why should he say untrue things? And yet how far are they untrue? They are untrue, she said to herself. There's nothing bad in our love, but he means that it is bad, that it is not love at all. He sees nothing but evil and wickedness in it, and it is that which I resent. They were both very troubled.

Videhi had not heard from Prem Nath now for three days, despite his promise to write daily. For over a day now she and Indira had been silent companions. Then Indira said to her, 'I have asked Narayan to come to the hostel. He will be in the visitors' room. Would you like to see him?'

'No,' said Videhi.

'One or the other I must believe in,' said Indira. 'You said I should ask him to repeat to you what he told me.'

'Well,' said Videhi, 'I'll come.'

On their way she looked in at the office where letters came. She saw there was one for her, from Prem Nath, though the handwriting looked shaky. Narayan was waiting for them. There was a constrained silence for some time. Videhi held her letter tightly; it was quite bulky. At least, she thought, that will be something sweet after this bitter interlude. No-one seemed willing to speak. Videhi broke the silence.

'You told Indira something about me, Narayan.'

'I told her the truth,' said Narayan shortly.

'How can you be so sure?' said Videhi. 'And how can you take the name of another person so easily and blacken it?'

'I told her what I had seen in Prem Nath's flat—the two of you, kissing each other. I told her I thought you shameless. I still think you are shameless. You pose as being so remote and different, but at heart you are vile. You cannot deny any of it.'

'I can deny your opinions, Narayan. They are false.'

'They are not false,' said Narayan. 'You I had looked up to, you I had admired and respected, and then I found you behaving like a woman of the streets. Prem Nath was my leader, my friend, my guide, but he, too, is untrue, a hypocrite. He is so much older than you, Videhi. What can he want of you save to make you a plaything? I know it happens like that in real life, men and women are base, but it hurt me to discover it of my friends. I felt that the world had suddenly become indecent and a mockery. I told Indira because I did not want her to be with you.'

'You are unfair,' said Videhi, 'and unjust, utterly unjust.'

'I am glad you feel it hard,' said Narayan. 'I suppose you wanted people to sympathise with you, but I won't. I hate you now; and as for Prem Nath, he is worthless. He is a common scoundrel to make love to a young woman, and you are a fool not to see it. He is just a cheat. I shall tell him so if ever I meet him.'

'I love Prem Nath,' said Videhi, 'and he loves me, that is all. There is no wickedness save in your imagination.'

'Who will believe that?' said Narayan. 'I saw you in his arms, lost in his love, giving yourself to him. I believe what I saw, Videhi. And I am sure Indira believes me. You need not worry. We will not tell anyone else.'

I would not see you a friend of Indira's and Indira unaware of your true nature. Now I am going.'

'You have not heard what Indira says,' said Videhi.

'I know what she will say, don't I, Indira?' He turned to Indira as he spoke, and Indira blushed.

'You make it very hard for me. I still do not understand. Perhaps there is nothing wrong, Narayan.'

As she was speaking Videhi was nervously opening the letter that Prem Nath had sent. To her surprise her own notes slipped out. She picked them up and saw that there was also a letter from Prem Nath. She read it quickly, instantaneously. He wrote:

'Dearest,

I write this in great pain. If you receive it you will know the pain is ended. I enclose your few precious letters. I do not want any embarrassment to follow you. I have the plague, and the pain of it drives even thought of love and you away. I knew it was too much to hope for. Dreams are ended. The doctor is my friend. He will post this to you if I die. The pain is so great, Videhi. The bones ache and there is agony in every vein. I want to send you a last message, but I am a broken man, Videhi. My only happiness is that you are not here to see me like this. The pain drives away love, Videhi, and I pray for the love to drive away the pain, but it does not, Videhi. You will remember me.

Prem Nath.'

'I suppose,' said Narayan, 'you are reading his love letter?'

Videhi got up and held all her letters tightly. She did not know what to do. From where had Prem written? How was it possible to find out at once if the news were

true? She had forgotten all that Narayan had said. It meant nothing to her. Perhaps the letter had been posted by mistake. Who would, who could find out for her?

'Tell me,' she said in a level low voice, 'what is Ram Singh's telephone number?'

'Why do you want to know?' asked Narayan.

'What is the matter, Videhi?' asked Indira. 'If you know the number tell her, Narayan.'

Narayan looked at his diary and gave her the number. The phone was in the visitors' room where they were. She rang the number given.

'I want to speak to Mr. Ram Singh,' she said, and someone answered. 'This is Videhi speaking, Ram Singh. I have just heard—is it true?'

Then she put the phone down and went to walk away.

'What is it, Videhi?' said Indira. 'Tell me.'

'Prem Nath,' said Videhi, 'Prem Nath is dead. He died of plague. The letter told me, and Ram Singh knows.'

Videhi walked out, leaving the two speechless. Indira was crying, and on Narayan's face was a look of utter misery.

Indira ran after Videhi. In her room she put her arms round Videhi, but Videhi pushed her away and said, 'Leave me, Indira. I do not want to speak again of Prem Nath, I cannot bear it.'

Chapter Twenty-two

THE DAYS and weeks that followed for Videhi were numb; she was aware of all that went on, but of her own sensations she seemed unconscious. She was strong enough to endure, and she was called upon to endure much. For a time she felt that the initial blow

had been easiest, and that what was worst was the slow, dull aching realisation of her loneliness and purposelessness. Ram Singh wrote to her. He was kindly and sympathetic and did not obtrude. He sensed that there had been a bond between Prem Nath and Videhi, and he respected it.

He told her that Prem Nath had been taken suddenly ill, and that he had died in his flat. His uncle had come down and taken away the books. There was no record or memento of Prem Nath left. Videhi felt it better so.

She would not forget and did not need any material thing to remind her of him. Ram Singh wrote to her briefly to describe how Prem Nath had impressed him with his kindness and wisdom. 'I suppose,' said Ram Singh in his letter, 'that in any real sense his influence was small, yet, after all, we knew him and loved him, and that is better than any fame.'

The details did not affect Videhi. She was still struck with the sense of loss. She could not talk about Prem Nath to Indira, but went on with her work, more quiet, more reserved, more intent. She felt unwilling to talk, for there were none among her friends who had known Prem Nath as she had known him. Her mother did not know of his existence, and Indira had misjudged him. She did not want to talk, but she thought all the more.

Death had suddenly become real to her. It was the last dark enemy that blotted out the light. It was the hollowness into which we descend, and discover no hollowness, no self. The thought of it was like the terror of falling in the dark endlessly. It is always there. To every human being it came, but until the loss was personal one ignored it. She could not see any escape from it, nor could she construct an escape in images of after death. It is the end of hope, she said to herself. Nothing is left. End it might be, but the thought remained with

her continually gnawing. The pain of death is one thing; the remembering of death another, more painful, more insidious. After the first numbness had worn off slightly, and the memory of Prem Nath dead was replaced by the memory of him living, bitter remorse filled her at the little they had made of their love. I could have been with him so much, she told herself, and I refrained. I thought I was being wise and prudent, now I see I was foolish. What is lost can never come back. These thoughts tormented her, and then they were gradually replaced by only the memory of Prem Nath and the few happy hours they had had together. She had his letters and her letters. She recalled his words that he had spoken and the scenes of love. On these memories she lingered and drew a sweetness out of them. They fed her and gave her strength to survive.

Her views of herself changed. She considered that she had hurt Kalyan; she knew she had injured Narayan; and to Prem Nath death had come. I am a woman marked out from the rest of the world. Happiness will never be mine, and in my trail there seems only destruction. It was a thought that angered her, but she could not escape it, though she was subtle and introspective enough to trace the motives behind the thought. The bruised soul needs protection and comfort, and it is a comfort to regard oneself as isolated, different, the special victim. But in what way am I special? Men and women die every day. Lovers die. Lovers are parted. It is a commonplace in the old story of humanity. I do not care how many others have died, or how common the theme may be. I am only myself, and I have lost the most precious thing in the world. What does it matter if everyone else loses it? That is no comfort. Repeatedly her thoughts, her dreams insisted that there was no comfort, and repeatedly the sick, hurt frame sought some

satisfaction. I will not give it, she said to herself. If this is life, let it be life, but I will not accept it. I do not understand death or pain or love or what pattern they make in our lives. I shall just go on and on.

Indira tried to sympathise with her, but Videhi told her she did not want sympathy.

'Nothing can alter what has happened,' she said. 'Let us not talk about it.'

'You will make yourself ill, Videhi,' said Indira.

'No,' answered Videhi. 'Life is stronger than you think. It is kind of you to say these things. Let us go on. I cannot alter the past, Indira, nor can I forget it. But I do not want to talk of it. Please let me be.'

Narayan wrote her a letter, short, unhappy, apologetic. She did not answer it, but told Indira to tell Narayan she had received the letter and understood it.

'He is very unhappy,' said Indira. 'He regrets so bitterly what he said about you and Prem Nath.'

'I, too, regret,' said Videhi.

Though her friendship with Prem Nath had not been known to others in the hostel besides Indira, it was seen that Videhi had changed and suffered. Meenakshi told Vishala what she had guessed, and Vishala told Miss Sitwell. One day Miss Sitwell called her to tea.

'I want to talk to you, Videhi,' she said. 'I am never inquisitive about the private lives of my students. You are one of our best students, Videhi, but you have still much to learn. Nothing is ever easy, Videhi, and growing up is just discovering the ever-increasing range of difficulties that front us. Pain teaches that understanding, and it shows you, not that personal happiness is wrong or its satisfaction improper, but that it so seldom comes; or when it does come, in a moment the cup of joy is dashed away from our lips. The abiding things, Videhi, are work and helping and caring for others. We can forget

the self in that. There is no end to the service that can be done, but it must be done well, efficiently, cleanly, distinctly and with detachment. All that is possible. There are so many things and conditions where we just cannot help, but in our profession some help is always possible, some progress always ready to be made.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I understand all that, Miss Sitwell. I am glad to become a doctor, but I do not believe it is all quite true. The work, the service is good in itself, but I think the devotion to it as a substitute for something one has lost is wrong. It is better to be frank, Miss Sitwell. The lost is lost. To work to forget the loss is almost childish. I shall always work, but I shall not forget.'

'My dear,' said Miss Sitwell, 'you claim a strength that many of us do not possess. I don't know whether you possess it yourself. Perhaps you desire it. We are not built that way, Videhi.'

'No,' said Videhi. 'There are drugs for many pains, and I know that it is often necessary to use them, but for the real pain there is no drug nor do I seek one. I do not understand why it is, but I feel we should just see things as they are, and hide nothing.'

'Tell me what you see, Videhi,' said Miss Sitwell.

'I see,' said Videhi, 'nothing but caprice and blackness, and I do not want to hide any of it from myself.'

'There is hope and love,' said Miss Sitwell.

'I have lost both,' said Videhi. 'They can never return to me.'

'There is hope and love for others,' said Miss Sitwell. 'What you have lost you may help others to find and win.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'that I know, but their hope and their love are still granted on the same capricious terms.'

'You are bitter, Videhi. Bitterness is also an anodyne.'

'I feel no bitterness,' said Videhi. 'I want only to be honest. I don't want to pretend about anything. I

want to work hard. I want to do well, but I don't want the work to be an escape. I don't believe it is. I don't want to see myself the slave of an ideal because of my own unhappiness. I shall work and serve, as you put it, and I shall believe in work and service. I shall never believe that they will make me forget. I shall never believe that they ought to make me forget. And I shall never accept them as better than what might have been. I will be faithful in my own fashion, ready to suffer still at life's unskilful hands, however clumsily they may tear me.'

'My dear,' said Miss Sitwell, 'I had forgotten. You are so wise in many things, Videhi, but I had forgotten how young you are. You terrify me when you challenge life so. Body and spirit, Videhi, have an immense capacity for suffering. We know too well what agony they can bear and survive, but body and spirit, Videhi, cannot bear all things. There comes a point in pain when both collapse. There is no need to challenge life to bring that point nearer. Time will make you wiser, Videhi.'

'I hate time,' said Videhi. 'It bears all the precious things away and leaves only the dregs behind.'

'No,' said Miss Sitwell, 'there are no dregs, Videhi.'

Videhi went away neither convinced nor unconvinced. People, she knew, wanted to help. She realised there was a fund of kindness in the world, often in unexpected places, but of what use was the kindness to one who had lost so much? Somehow the term ended. There was always her work and the already established routine. She was grateful for the work, but even in every busy day there came those moments of emptiness, and her body, mentally but not physically tired, ached with longing. The most difficult of all she found her letters home to Shalini and Shubha. She did not want to reveal her sorrow to them, partly because they had not

known her previous happiness, and partly because she did not want to pain them with the thought of what she had lost and what she might have done had Prem Nath lived. She had written, however, once a week, and so weekly she continued to write rather short colourless letters about her studies. She was not looking forward to the return to Kashi. She feared lest she might be noticed as changed, and she wanted to avoid their questioning. Once there, it might be different. She would be back in an old familiar routine, one that she had loved, and one in which Prem Nath had played no part. It might be easier in Kashi, but she was greatly worried lest Shalini should notice any change in her.

What she had feared so much, however, was groundless. At home there was only one topic, and that was Shubha's coming child. She was happy herself at this, and doubly happy in that it kept conversation away from Delhi. She talked with Shubha and Shalini about it, the diet and health of the mother, the care she should take, the doctor or nurse she should call in. They were forever discussing the future of the unborn child, names it might have, the character it should develop, and the future it might seize. Shubha was very keen to be practical and modern and scientific—strange in a young Hindu wife—and Shalini, which to Videhi was stranger still, supported her. Not that there was any argument. In the cool of each evening they went out for walks together for half an hour or so. Sometimes Vidur came. More often he stayed with Ganesh and talked to him. Ganesh had grown very fond of Vidur, and he thought that perhaps Vishnu would follow in his footsteps, and that Vidur in eight or nine years' time would be able to help Vishnu to a post in a bank. So the three were often alone, and they went regularly the few walks that were possible in their

neighbourhood. It was pleasant and relaxing. Videhi had brought several textbooks with her and daily read and studied. Shalini asked her if she did not study enough in Delhi.

"Yes," answered Videhi. 'But there is so much to learn, and time's always short.'

Then the rains broke towards the end of June, and Videhi welcomed them as she had always welcomed them. It seemed to her then, as she stood in their doorway watching the rain pour down from the big, heavy, black clouds and smelt again the damp, dust-laden earth, that this she had also done before, that there were no changes in life, that the fixed pattern prevailed. How many times, she wondered, have I watched the rain fall and loved it?

'You will get wet,' said Shalini, 'if you stand there long. Your sari is already wet. Come in, Videhi.'

And that, too, seemed an echo. It was as though life were a play and one's part came again and again without change.

'I love the rain,' said Videhi.

'It is very inconvenient,' said Shalini. 'Our roof leaks and we have to bring the beds inside, and then it gets stuffy and hot, and all the insects come out with the rains. They are horrible.'

One evening just before she was due to go back to Delhi Shalini and Videhi went to Shubha's house for their usual walk, but they found it very muddy, and so they all three stayed there, sitting outside in the garden talking.

'What will you do when you go back, Videhi?' asked Shubha.

'I shall go into the hospital wards,' said Videhi.

'I don't think I should like that,' said Shubha.

'It is necessary,' said Videhi. 'There is no other

way to learn. I don't know that I shall like it, but I shall be glad to feel that I have reached that stage of learning.'

'You did not ask Indira to come here,' said Shalini.

'No,' said Videhi. 'You did not mention it again in your letters, and, besides, I like Kashi to be just ourselves. It is so easy and homely here. An outsider would disturb all that.'

'I would have liked to have seen her,' said Shalini. 'You might ask her over for the winter holidays, but we will be occupied with Shubha's baby. I just wondered whether she was still your friend.'

'Of course,' said Videhi.

'You have not spoken much about her,' said Shalini. 'I know friends come and go amongst girls, but then you are not that kind of girl, so I thought perhaps something had happened.'

'What do you mean?' asked Videhi. 'How could anything else happen?'

'I meant that perhaps you had a new friend.'

'No,' said Videhi abruptly.

On their way back to their home Shalini continued the conversation.

'You must not mind what I say, Videhi,' she said. 'Each time you have come back from Delhi different, and this time is no exception. You are sad, Videhi, and a little cold and distant. I thought perhaps you might have met someone, perhaps that you might have fallen in love, and that you might be worried at what to do. We never talk about Kalyan now, but he is still there, he will always be there, and you are his wife. I know that love knocks at doors carelessly without caring who is inside. When you left Kalyan I did not mind so much because you had left him, though at the time I felt that also, but what I minded most was

the chain you had put upon yourself for the future, or rather the chains we had put upon you. If you fall in love, Videhi, I do not know what you can do, nor do I know what to tell you, except one thing which you know but may forget in your pain, that there is always a home for you here, and that you will always be welcome whatever happens.'

'Thank you, Mother,' said Videhi. 'But nothing will happen, I assure you. I am not worried, nor have I any problems. Perhaps I have been working too hard and I am tired.'

Shalini said nothing more.

That night in her bed Videhi wondered why she had not responded to her mother's call for confidence. I did not want to awaken old wounds, she said to herself, but the wounds are still there awake, and if I told her she would not worry any more and she would be happy that I told her. Prem Nath is mine, she thought. I will not share him. Yet for long in the night she dwelt upon that question of whether to tell Shalini. In her sleep she dreamed of Prem Nath and felt again his kiss upon her lips, but the dream ended in loneliness and bitterness, and she told herself at dawn that silence was best. I will seek no sympathy, not even Shalini's.

Chapter Twenty-three

A LULL came upon her life during the next three years whilst she was completing her medical studies. It seemed sometimes to her that she had been forgotten by angry fate and left in peace as an observer. So many things happened, but not to her.

She was the outsider, the witness, not the sacrifice or the victim. Slowly she progressed through the various hospital grades, watching first how the doctors attended outpatients, noticing their often blunt and callous manner: some severe and searching in their questions, others casual, few interested in the patients as people. The best were only excited when a unique or unusual form of illness arose, or by a miracle the perfect textbook case was presented. She noticed, too, the endless patience of the poor: how they waited without complaint, often for hours, on the hospital veranda; how quietly they accepted the scolding of a doctor for not coming sooner or for some fault he had observed; how grateful, too, they were for any treatment, treasuring the prescription as a holy relic. Her first and abiding impressions were that the veil of decency was torn away ruthlessly, that the sores were exposed as though they were in a beast, that they were probed as though they were things in themselves. Kindness and understanding were not heard of. To the doctor it was a tedious duty without reward, a line of complaints to be got through as quickly as possible. When she hinted this to someone, the answer came, 'But what can we do? These people come expecting miracles. Many of them should be in hospital, but they are afraid to stay. The remedies they really need are prolonged, costly, more often social than medical; they need more food, a new outlook on personal hygiene; they need knowledge, education. We cannot give them that. Each morning we see twenty or thirty of them, often more. We can only give them a little time. We cannot search deeply into each case. We must complete them all, or send them away to come back to wait another day. We also are human. I admit that what we do is often little, and the manner of doing it harsh. It is only you and I, Videhi, who see

that. The patients are always content, and they go away thinking they will be cured, and that is a big thing, better than the cheap medicine we give them. You'll see yourself when you have to do it.'

Her experience in the wards was better. Here the hospital at least had the patients more under their control and the normal routine of medical attention was possible. The cases admitted to the wards were serious. People only came when they felt death very near, or there had been some accident. Though medical attention was given there was still little humanity. The patients were cases on which the surgeon could practise his skill and from which the students might learn the intricacies of the structure and mechanism of the living body, as they had previously learnt from the dead ones. All this, said Videhi, is animal pain, the pain of the torn, twisted body. To relieve it we must be without sentiment, for that is a comfort which misleads. Pain was a commonplace to them. It required something very extraordinary to arouse their interest, some horror best hidden in a hospital, and best described in the cold, formal, archaic language of the medical textbooks.

It was a change to turn from these cases in the general wards to those in the private wards. Here there was more personality and individuality. It is rather curious, thought Videhi. In the general wards where the poor are the doctors seem harsh and callous; in the private wards they get angry with the patients and resent the feeling that their services are being bought, and they object strongly to the usual constant stream of visitors or the permanent private servants or the relatives who stay with the patients.

In the women's ward, though there was every evidence of malnutrition and ignorance and though pain reigned supreme, life and nature were the theme—birth, not

death. Sad cases there were daily. Young girls of thirteen or fourteen brought to hospital at the last minute because of some complication in parturition. Others ill and diseased yet ready to bear life. Others who came because of some abortion or miscarriage. Nature thwarted. Here more than anywhere there was hope, for the children were born and new life was provided. Videhi liked this side of hospital life. Nothing hurt or offended her. If there was dirt, it was to be washed away gently and carefully, with no thought but the restoration of cleanliness. If there was pain, it was to be comforted, and the woman strengthened to bear it.

Time, however, even with all these, was never quite so full as to exclude the memory of Prem Nath. This she regarded as the sweet thing in her life, the pain of which was now blunted. She never spoke about him, even to Indira. She could willingly share Indira's own hopes and fears with regard to Narayan. She felt no anger against him. Indira had continued going to the meetings for a term. She could not resolve within herself whether she went for love of Narayan or because of a genuine interest in socialism. Narayan was friendly towards Indira, but he did not declare any stronger personal attachment, and Indira was perforce content with the friendship and work together. At the end of a year from the death of Prem Nath, Narayan left Delhi. He had finished his studies and had gone to Bombay, where he took a job in a stockbroker's office. Indira was surprised at this and told Videhi.

'He has to start work somehow,' said Videhi. 'One thing is probably as good as another.'

'But why this?' said Indira. 'After all he has said and thought it seems so wrong. It is so against his principles.'

'What does he say himself?' asked Videhi.

‘He says nothing,’ said Indira. ‘He just wrote me a letter saying that he was taking this kind of job without any hint that it might be considered strange.’

For a time Indira wrote to him, but the intervals between the letters grew longer, and then one day she received a wedding invitation from Narayan. He was getting married. She showed it to Videhi.

‘I thought, Videhi,’ she said, ‘that if ever I should receive anything like this I would be dreadfully upset, but somehow I don’t even feel hurt. I shall write to congratulate him. I have learnt something at least, that love can die. Once I did not think it possible.’

Since Narayan had left Delhi she had dropped her interest in socialism, and this, too, she did not seem to mind. Her own profession held her, and she was keen to finish her course and then specialise in public health.

To her surprise, she received a long letter from Narayan after his marriage. He wrote:

‘My dear Indira,

I thank you for your last letter congratulating me on my marriage. I do not know in what spirit you wrote it. I am half afraid that I have given you cause for bitterness and perhaps even contempt. I do not know that I can explain myself. My job must have seemed strange to you, and my marriage even stranger. I can assure you that I am happy in my work and happy in my marriage with a still quiet happiness and no excitement or tenseness. I think that is best. I look back on the past now almost with amusement, though with regret. I do not really think my ideas were wrong, but they seem to me now to be meaningless; that is, not ready either for the time or for myself. It was myself who was wrong

then, not the ideas. I have thought many times that I was unfair to you, and that possibly you expected more of our friendship than friendship. I could not give more. I do not know if you ever guessed or were told, but before Prem Nath died it was Videhi that I loved, and I had only just realised that I loved her when I found out that she loved Prem Nath. I was too jealous and angry and bitter to do anything but say ugly harsh words, and I was too consumed with love and regret to have any time for you. Something went out of my life then. You will probably despise me for saying this, but I love Videhi still. I shall never love anyone as I loved Videhi, never know again all that agony of longing poured out in vain; and so I am content with my marriage and my return to normal life. Only I would like you to know this. I do not want you to think that I have betrayed either you or Videhi or my ideals. I know it looks like that, but it is not true. Meeting Videhi was the supreme experience in my life, but it was the climax from which no progress was possible. My friendship with you and our meetings together were very happy and I shall not forget them; but I have changed, Indira, and I think it is braver to admit the change. Perhaps to you I have done the greater hurt. I am sorry. You know nothing was intentional. We are very much puppets. Then I resented being a puppet, now I do not seem to mind, and so I say farewell to youth and its dreams and to you.'

Indira showed the letter to Videhi.

'I never realised,' she said, 'that Narayan was in love with you, though it should have been so plain to me.'

'And you,' said Videhi—'what do you feel?'

‘Nothing at all,’ said Indira. ‘Just curious, a little amused, and a little sorry that we can be so blind and so unaware of the truth.’

‘It is only from the outside,’ said Videhi, ‘that one can see everything, and then it all looks different. We see then the enormous possibilities of experience and the scope for variety and change. Inside one feels imprisoned, the centre of forces, the slave of fate, but I do not know which is the truer view. However, I hope Narayan will be content, and I am glad you are not distressed.’

So life went on through the terms with very little touching the core of Videhi, though as time passed she felt a growing longing for independence. It was not that she disliked anything in Delhi, but she was no more drawn to it as she had been the first two years of her stay there. The long years of study were worrying her. The routine of life at Delhi and the return in holiday time to Kashi had become almost mechanical. She took pleasure still in Kashi and her family there, but she longed for something new and looked forward impatiently to the time when she would be a qualified doctor. I don’t expect new or startling things to happen to me, she thought, but the present is a burden, and to be always learning tedious. She began to dream of where she would settle down—not Delhi or Bombay or Kashi, she thought, and certainly not Poona. It must be some new place, small and quiet, and somewhere where I am unknown. The intensity of her desire for a change surprised her. It was not that she wanted so desperately her career to commence. She was keen on that, but it was really a side issue. It was not, either, that she wanted to forget Delhi, or was it? That doubt troubled her. Was the desire to forget the beginning of the forgetting? Was the doubt she felt an inward self-reproach that she

was already forgetting? How can I forget? she said to herself. How can I forget the pain I have suffered, the pain I still suffer? How can I forget those few happy days of utter joy and delight? Poona remains embedded in my memory. Delhi remains in my memory. Prem Nath is still there and so is Kalyan. Yet sometimes I feel that not only is the present a weariness, this endless round of study and reading, but also the past.

Kashi changed and did not change. Home was the same, yet still developing. A daughter came to Shubha, and Vasanti was married. Then another child came to Shubha. Vasanti was very ill soon after her marriage, so ill that Videhi was called away from Delhi, and for the first time in many years she saw illness and pain again in her own home and felt more keenly what it meant to the sufferers. Vasanti recovered and life continued. Videhi was worried sometimes about her mother. Her old troubles had come back. Shalini only smiled and said, 'I am so used to them, Videhi; they no longer matter.' Videhi tended on her when she was at home, and insisted that she should take proper medical advice. Shalini submitted to this.

'I no longer care very much,' she said. 'I have done my part. I have brought up my children. There are only Sakuntala and Vishnu left now, and I am content about them. I do not want to die, but I do not want so desperately to live. Let me see you working and I shall be utterly content.'

Vasanti also lived in Kashi. There were three homes there now for Videhi. She liked them all, but she felt all the more strongly that she should have a home of her own, or at least a place of her own.

The last holiday before her final examinations, the winter holidays, she brought Indira with her.

'At last,' said Shalini, 'you have come. You know,

for years now you have been almost a part of our home. I am so glad to see you. For over five years Videhi has been in Delhi, coming and going, and now we can meet someone who knows her in Delhi.'

'Indira was very pleased with Kashi and loved the old city at once. Videhi took her to all the places; sometimes alone, sometimes with Shalini. They went to Sarnath and to Ramnagar. They went on the river, though in the daytime, as it was cold at night. They went shopping in Chowk and explored the ghats and the temples. They went to Shubha's house and to Vasanti's.

'It is so nice,' said Indira, 'to be home amongst kindly simple people. We have got so used in Delhi to the hostel life, to being in an institution, to working in a hospital, to being part of a timetable, that we lose touch with home and the real foundation of our work.'

'You are free in Delhi,' said Shalini.

'Yes,' said Indira, 'there is freedom there, but only of a kind, and not enough. We live in a world of strangers, and we can do things without always having to consult others, or to think of others, but it is a small compensation for what we lose.'

'It will soon be over,' said Shalini, 'and then your reward for all these long years will come. In a few months you will both be doctors, working for yourselves. Have you thought where you will work?'

'Yes,' said Indira. 'We think of that and talk about it a lot. We will have to go where we are taken. I don't know yet. The first year we'll probably get a job in a school or hospital, one of the small ones. We shall have to see.'

'You are not worried about the examinations?' asked Shalini.

'We always worry until we pass them,' said Indira, 'but so far we have been very lucky.'

‘You have worked hard,’ said Shalini. ‘You deserve to pass.’

‘That’s what we think,’ said Indira, ‘but the examiners don’t always think the same, do they, Videhi?’

Videhi laughed.

‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘I feel so tired of our books that I tell myself when the exams are over I shall burn them, but I know I won’t.’

‘I think you both have been very brave to endure all this time and work,’ said Shalini. ‘When I think of what you have done and what you can do, I feel almost ashamed of myself.’

‘That is quite wrong,’ said Indira, ‘and you know it. You have brought up a family, we have done nothing yet.’

‘Some day you will,’ said Shalini. ‘And perhaps some day you, too, will have a family of your own.’

‘No,’ said Indira, ‘I am quite sure of that.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ said Shalini. ‘Doctors can marry like other people.’

‘The chance is there,’ said Indira, ‘but, you know, you can tell within you whether it will ever happen, and I know it won’t for me.’

‘Not even that feeling is certain,’ said Shalini. ‘It is the unexpected that happens, not the wished for.’

‘Well,’ said Indira, ‘if ever it does I shall invite you to the wedding; but I don’t think it will, do you, Videhi?’

Their last evening in Kashi they decided to go to the cinema, Shalini, Videhi and Indira.

‘After Delhi,’ said Shalini, ‘our cinemas will seem awful. I expect Videhi has told you about them. I myself have not been for ever so long, but it will be an outing, and we will all put on our best saris.’

She showed Indira her own saris; she still had three or four fine silk ones, Madrassi and Marathi.

'I like that gold one,' said Indira. 'That is very lovely.'

'Well, I'll wear that for your sake. What are you going to wear?'

'Indira has lots of saris,' said Videhi. 'It is her one weakness. She bought a fine new red one just before we left Delhi, and she has a lovely one in cream silk that she bought here.'

'I'll wear that,' said Indira. 'The red one is too thin for these cool nights.'

Shalini admired her cream Madrassi sari with its thin lines of gold interwoven in it.

'And what will you wear?' she asked Videhi.

'I don't know,' she said. 'You know what I have—you choose it for me, Shalini.'

'This is a new one,' said Shalini. 'I did not know you had this. It is very beautiful.'

She took out the black silk sari that Prem Nath had given her. Videhi had never worn it. All this time she had left it in Delhi carefully wrapped up. Now she had brought it back to Kashi almost without thinking.

'I have not seen you ever wear that one either,' said Indira. 'It is really lovely. Do wear it, please, Videhi.'

Videhi agreed, and thought within herself with a pang, Prem Nath gave it to me and never saw me in it. I'll wear it for his sake. It will be the final reconciliation. The three got ready, and Ganesh and the two remaining children admired them.

'You are too fine for us,' he said.

'Yes,' said Shalini. 'Tonight will be a purdah party for us.'

'You look beautiful, Mother,' said Videhi.

'Not so beautiful as you two,' said Shalini.

The film began. It was in Hindi and was an easy modern romantic subject, with much of the story in the

open in a very beautiful village. The tale was about the love of a young man, studying in Bombay, for a fellow student. They were both careless and gay, and the young man was wealthy. The girl was modern-minded and went to parties in the city and out riding in the car with the boy. But she would not listen to his love and flirted with other men. In the holidays she went to stay at her cousin's house in a village a few miles outside Bombay. The boy followed her and met the cousin. She was beautiful, shy, orthodox, but not beyond the gaiety of singing and dancing. He fell in love with the cousin, and then the other girl got jealous and tried to win him back. There was no serious or tense emotion or conflict, and in the end there were two happy marriages. Most of the scenes were in the village and were well done, with the girls under blossoming trees and by streams. Much of the simple homely life of the village was also quite cleverly incorporated. The acting was natural, without the forced melodrama of many films. They all enjoyed it. Best of all was the singing of the village girl, Kamala. As they listened to the first song, Indira whispered to Videhi, 'That is surely Meenakshi,' and as the film proceeded they were quite certain.

'What does she call herself now?' asked Videhi. 'Do you remember the names of the people in the film?'

'One of them is Lila Shante,' said Indira. 'She is the girl from Bombay. The other, Meenakshi, is called Manorama. She is certainly very good.'

On their way home they told Shalini about Meenakshi. Shalini remembered her as one of Videhi's first friends.

'She left Delhi two years ago,' said Indira. 'We knew she was going into the films or music, but we did not hear any more of her. I am glad we have seen this film. We must write to her, Videhi. We must not let

her pass out of our lives. We can write to her at her studio, the Bombay one, by her film name; the letter is sure to reach her. She has great gifts. I never thought I'd know a real film actress. She was so natural, so simple and honest. She makes you feel in love with the simple orthodox life in the village.'

It was late and dark when they got back, but the two children were still up, and they both wanted to know about the film. Ganesh remembered the name Manorama. He did not go to the films himself any more than Shalini, but he heard all the talk about them from the teachers and the girls in his school.

'Yes, I know Manorama. She has appeared in three films so far, and each time in the same kind of part, the simple innocent village girl.'

Indira was quite excited at the discovery and spoke often about Meenakshi on their journey back to Delhi.

Work immediately occupied them, and night after night they sat up late poring over books and assisting each other. They were conscious only of the work to be done and had forgotten all other things. Each looked forward to the end. It would be such a relief when the strain and tension of all this work had finished. Videhi's letters home now were brief. She wanted to concentrate everything on the examination. To that end all other thoughts were subordinate. They allowed themselves daily relaxation almost on medical grounds, and for one hour each day they talked on anything but medicine, or tried to, though medicine kept creeping in. Videhi was surprised at the intensity of their concentration. Though they had been studying for years and had learnt much and seen much, only now did she feel fully aware of the gripping interest pure impersonal technique had. Our present devotion, she told herself, must be very like that of the artist to his craft or the singer or

dancer in her training, vigorous, intensive, all-embracing. It was, however, she realised, purely practical and for a limited goal. Once the exams were passed they would both relax. Neither of them felt any special virtue in their persistence. Much as Videhi had admired and respected Miss Sitwell, she had not been won over to her ideals of selfless devotion to service. The love I bore Prem Nath, she said to herself, is still there as strong as ever. The memory has not faded, nor the intensity of the longing, though it is true I do not now experience it with such wild happiness as at first. The pain I have endured has been unspeakable, but I have preserved myself and my integrity. I will not let life beat me into submission or acceptance, nor will I deny what I think the real purpose of life, the happiness of the individual. It has not been possible for me except for a brief while, but it is true.

Indira had written, as she had promised, to Meenakshi. For a few weeks they received no reply. They thought the letter had gone astray. Then one day the answer came. Indira had told Meenakshi that they had seen the film in Kashi and liked it very much, and that they wanted to know about her, her progress and her career. Meenakshi wrote:

‘My dear Indira,

‘I was so happy to get your letter. You must forgive me for delaying so long in answering you, but I am very busy. We work extremely hard in the studios and I love it. You ask me about myself. So many things have happened. It astonishes me that you are both still in Delhi and still students. Does life never change for you? How is Videhi? I could not tell you all that has happened here to me. I have my work and my singing and I know so many people.

I live for love and music and do not care who knows it. I am terribly in love at the moment, but I am sure neither of you understand love. However, I am very happy and I would like to see you in Bombay if you can possibly come. I could easily accommodate the two of you. I suppose you must be both very nearly doctors now. I would love it for all three of us to meet again—you two so wise and cautious and I so vagrant. Ask Videhi to write to me, and do try to see me.'

'She has not changed,' said Videhi. 'But I don't know that I would care to go to Bombay. It would bring back the past. Still, I will write to her after the examinations.'

'She almost seems to patronise us,' said Indira. 'I wonder what sort of life she leads.'

'Apparently,' said Videhi, 'the one she wants, and who can ask for more?'

The examinations came and were over. Both girls had done well, they felt confident of that. But they wanted to know the results. Until they were announced they did not want to tempt fate by applying for jobs.

'We must celebrate,' said Indira, 'when we know. We must say goodbye to our student days, and welcome our new future.'

The sense of relief at the end of the examinations was very great, and so was the feeling that a decisive line in their lives had been reached.

'And yet, after all,' said Videhi, 'what has really happened? There has been no real change.'

'Change enough,' said Indira. 'I am going to read all the books I have missed reading for so long and become civilised again. I am going to soak myself in poetry and novels.'

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'now we can read without feeling guilty. I wonder how I will find them. I wonder if my taste for them has been blunted.'

'No,' said Indira, 'there is no fear of that. I am hungry for them.'

Their habits of study, however, persisted, and they read the books as they had read their medical textbooks, keenly, quickly, and with intense concentration. The results were announced. They had both passed. At last the moment for which they had longed had come. Their friends and their tutors congratulated them and they had some happy hours.

'Nothing remains now,' said Videhi, 'but to return home and look for a job.'

Their last night together in Delhi they sat up late talking of the future and the past and all that they had endured together.

Freedom, or the sense of it, had suddenly come to them. Indira was insistent that after a time she would pursue some line of medical research. Having got so far, it was silly not to go on.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'But I expect we will find our work sufficiently satisfying.'

'No,' said Indira. 'I don't want to sink into obscurity. I want to get on.'

'Well,' said Videhi, 'we have been obscure enough so far. It has not been so bad.'

'That's because we've been buoyed up by hope,' said Indira. 'But we'll see. You must promise to write always to me, Videhi.'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'We won't lose touch. But you must not expect many letters, Indira. We shall both have lots to do. It is not letters that make friends. We shall always be friends whether we write or not. I don't think friendship dies.'

'Of course not,' said Indira. 'How can it?'

'So many things die,' said Videhi. 'Ends are always coming.'

'Love does not die,' said Indira, forgetting what she had once said.

'It can die,' answered Videhi, 'or be taken away from you, and I do not know which is worse. Death and forgetting are very similar.'

And the talk brought back to Videhi her early dreams with Prem Nath, of how they would wait for this time when she would be free to earn and live with him independently. The time had come, but Prem Nath was not there, only the great emptiness, the bitter sorrow, the lonely, aching longing. It made it worse that she could analyse it psychologically and understand it physically. It is as though my body were separate from me, and I see its longings and aches; as though my mind were separate from me, and I see all its desires and dreams. Hard work and study have not stilled the pain, nor service dimmed the clear outlines of our dreams. How happy Prem Nath would have been, and how happy I! Videhi felt lonelier than she had ever felt before. She had so often in the past three years looked forward urgently to the end of Delhi days when she could escape from the restrictions and from the memories into a new life of freedom. Now she felt there would be no change, and tears came into her eyes.

'You are crying, Videhi,' said Indira. 'We should be happy.'

'We should, Indira,' said Videhi. 'We should be so many things, but I am still a child crying for the moon, and why shouldn't we? The moon is so beautiful and our dreams sweet. Both are denied us.'

'I am sorry,' said Indira.

'There is no need for sorrow,' said Videhi. 'It was

just a mood. It will pass, and come again. I feel so empty, Indira, and Prem Nath came back into my mind vividly. I loved him, Indira. I have never spoken about him, but he has remained my inner life. What shall I do, Indira?' And she wept openly.

'My dear,' said Indira, 'be happy you have a dream.'

'No, no,' cried Videhi. 'No dreams. I don't want dreams. I don't want words. I want him, Indira—just one touch of his living flesh. I know now why life is so precious, Indira. I want him desperately.'

'He is dead,' said Indira.

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'that is something I cannot learn. Why did I not love him more, Indira? We are such cowards in love. Why did I not take what life gave me then? If only I had let him love me, Indira. If only there had been a child. I wanted his love, Indira, and he wanted mine. We knew it so well of each other, but we thought we'd be wise and practical and prudent. What fools we were. Oh, Indira, what fools we were.'

'How could you have carried on with a child, Videhi?' asked Indira. 'What life would the child have had? You know it would have been impossible.'

'No,' said Videhi, 'not impossible. I do not know what I would have done, but it would have been better than this.'

'You are tired, Videhi.'

'No, for once I am telling the truth. Don't feel bad about me, Indira. I have so long wanted to say these things, only now I have the courage. It makes me happy to say it. Let me be frank for once.'

Through the night in her troubled sleep the same thoughts possessed her. She let herself indulge in them. I am free now. The studies are finished. Let me think only of Prem Nath and the past, before the future enchains me again. And back to her mind came the

images of the time and the Delhi she had loved. They said I would forget, she told herself, but I can never forget you, Prem Nath. They said I would lose you in work, but I have not. Nor shall I ever all my life. I shall remain wedded to you. The word brought back thought of Kalyan and those few hours she had spent in Poona with him. So short a time, and yet so momentous for her life. Escape from Poona had brought her to Delhi, and Delhi had brought her Prem Nath. I owe Poona something for that. I owe Kalyan something for that. From him came my joy, and also the pain. She wondered for a moment what he had done since. He, too, must have suffered. It was almost the first time she had admitted that Kalyan might have been hardly dealt with. Then she brushed the thought aside, and back again came the thought that Prem Nath was only a dream. Must all my life be spent with a dream? She felt disloyal to harbour such a thought, but she could not drive it from her head. In her dreams Prem Nath returned and Kalyan, and she woke very troubled. I thought, she said to herself, that when I married Kalyan I had made the last decision and that all else would follow, certainly without further anguish or doubt or hesitancy; then when I left Kalyan I felt again a bridge had been crossed, and that the road ahead was clear; and when I came to Delhi first there was another decision made. Each time it seemed final, and I welcomed it because it was the final one. Then when I loved Prem Nath and we admitted to each other our loves it was the same, only this time the decision was taken with happiness and gaiety, and it seemed to me that life's plan shone clearly without doubt or possibility of sorrow. Then that ended, and I thought in my loneliness that when I had finished with studies and Delhi a new life could begin, but already I am hesitant, uncertain

and afraid. Will there be no end? she wondered. And what is it that worries me? Is it the loneliness, the physical ache of longing never satisfied, the tiredness of living with a dream, or the fear of the future, the finding of a new job and the setting myself up in a new place, or the fear that I have come to doubt the dream, or the sense that I still find the future insecure after longing so ardently for it, or remorse that all these thoughts should assail me? Perhaps I am just exhausted and weak with all these years of study and hard intensive work in loneliness. She could not decide, but as the day passed and she drew nearer to Kashi thought of home eased her mind, and she looked out of the train window and smiled at the beauty of the land, hot and dusty as it was. The trees, the villages, the temple flags, and the white shining mosques, the cattle and the women in the fields were a flowing, peaceful picture. This lovely land at least cannot be destroyed, beauty remains; and though she did not sleep well on the train, for it was hot and crowded and the rhythm of the wheels kept her awake, she felt a kind of ease. Whatever I do the train will carry me to Kashi. I have just to wait. Perhaps that is the way to live, to let the forces of life carry one on, to trust in them.

Chapter Twenty-four

VIDEHI had acquired letters from her tutors and college, and they had also given her introductions to some people in the medical service in the United Provinces. After her arrival home she began writing to them, and daily she consulted the local and national news-

papers to see their advertisements for doctors. Several possible posts came, and for these she wrote, borrowing the services of the clerk in her father's school to get her testimonials typed. Days of waiting followed. Sometimes there was no acknowledgement. Sometimes there was, but nothing further, no call for an interview. Six tedious weeks went by, and she wondered if ever she would get a job.

At home she carried on helping Shalini in the house, although now that two of the girls were married and the others grown up there was not so much work to do. She had long conversations with her mother and she read a little. She felt too nervous to read much, and for once she found Kashi tiresome. Nevertheless both the boredom and the waiting occupied her and she did not dream again those lonely dreams of Prem Nath. It was still hot and unpleasant. With the breaking of the monsoons she thought news would come. The rains would bring release. She was anxious to earn. She wanted money to be able to pay back to the school what they had given her, and she wanted to help Shalini also. She felt awkward being completely dependent on her home, though she knew the feeling was wrong.

Then a letter came from Miss Sitwell. She wrote to say that there was a post vacant in the Bihar medical service in a small hospital at Chotapuri. She knew the people concerned there and had herself written a letter about Videhi. She wanted Videhi to apply formally. It was only a small place and they would pay only a hundred and ten rupees to begin with, but there was a bungalow provided furnished and they would allow the resident doctor to practise privately. It would be a good beginning for Videhi. Videhi was excited and wrote at once to thank Miss Sitwell and to apply for the post. In a few days she received a letter asking her to

come for an interview at Patna. Shalini and Ganesh were very happy. They were quite confident that Videhi would secure the post.

‘You must not be so certain,’ said Videhi.

‘No, no,’ said Ganesh. ‘These things always happen the same way. You are highly qualified and have a good degree, but people don’t look at merit by itself. You must have some influence, you must be recommended by someone. Miss Sitwell is doing that. I know they would not want to offend her, and we know that she thinks highly of you.’

Videhi discussed with Shalini what she should wear for the interview, and whether she should stay in Patna.

‘I can manage quite easily and come back at once,’ said Videhi. ‘I shall only have a few hours’ wait in the railway station, and we don’t know anyone in Patna. The train gets in more than an hour before the interview, so I shall have time enough. I’ll wear a white cotton sari. It looks simple and neat and professional.’

Off she went to Patna full of hope and the good wishes of her family. Crossing the great river at Patna gave her courage. The dear Ganges was always there, so broad, so sweeping, so powerful. She felt the sight of the river again was a good omen. The interview was in one of the big Patna hospitals. There were three people present, the European civil surgeon and two Indian doctors. They asked her only about her career at Delhi and whether she would be able to live by herself at Chotapuri. They wanted to know when she could start duty, and she told them at once. Then they said they would give her a week in which to get ready, and she realised she had got the post. She had expected the interview to be formidable, but then she thought, Why should it be? It is only for a poor post of no great concern to them. Still, she was glad, more than glad,

and the next few days at Kashi were extremely busy. She wrote, of course, to Miss Sitwell and to Indira, who sent her a telegram of congratulations. She packed her clothes and books and provided herself with a few kitchen utensils. Shalini said she would have liked to go with her and stay a few days just to help her set up her own home.

'For you will be very busy in the hospital and you will still have to look after yourself,' she said.

But Shalini was ill again and she would not be able physically to help.

'You take,' she said to Videhi, 'a servant from Kashi. It will make you feel less lost and we will feel that you are not alone. The sister of Shubha's maid would like to go.'

Videhi thought it a good idea.

'I will come,' said Shalini, 'when I am better. You have a place now to receive me and it is not far away.'

The hospital at Chotapuri was small and the whole compound rather dilapidated. There was more untidiness and slovenliness than she had expected. There were two other doctors there besides herself. Both were married and living with their families. One was a Dr. Sitaraman from Madras, and the other a Dr. Shukla from Allahabad. Her bungalow was in a dusty waste at the women's end of the hospital. The maternity ward and the women's general ward were at her doorstep. Two or three untidy dhais were walking up and down the veranda. Here and there a dirty servant was squatting on the floor. In the grounds there were little heaps of rubbish. After Delhi it was certainly a change, and she felt shocked. She realised how very small her world here would be and how drab and dismal it looked. The bungalow was small. It was square, with four rooms. There was a veranda all round, and the two end corner rooms

each had a bathroom. The kitchen was separate but adjacent. The furniture consisted of a bed with hospital frame, a table, two straight chairs, and one long-armed chair. Still, each room had a ceiling fan, and she knew that in time it would be improved; but it was not a very pleasant welcome.

'We will get you more things,' said Dr. Sitaraman, 'as you need them. The hospital scales do not allow much. If you have visitors we can get extra beds from the wards.'

'It will do,' said Videhi. 'It is all I need at the moment.'

The kitchen was bare, but it had a good built-in cooking place. Her servant seemed quite happy with it. They had brought rice and grain with them and Marathi pickles, and the servant went off at once to the bazaar to get fresh vegetables. There was so little in the bungalow that unpacking and settling down were over in a few minutes.

Dr. Sitaraman said she should have her first meal with them.

'Our house is also in the hospital compound. I'll take you through the hospital and then bring you to my wife. You won't feel lonely then.'

There were twenty beds in the women's general ward, only half of them in use. In the maternity ward there was one expectant mother.

'The dhai is looking after her,' said Dr. Sitaraman. 'I don't think there'll be any trouble. I don't think you'll be called.'

Videhi was shocked at the interior of the wards. Everything looked dusty. The paint on the beds was scratched and broken, the walls had not been distempered for a long time, and there was a thick, dark, olive-green paint at the foot of the walls. It was musty and

offensive. The two main wards where the men were were even worse. There were more patients here and more dirt and greater smells. There was a little operating theatre and a small laboratory and dispensary.

‘Our biggest work,’ said Dr. Sitaraman, ‘is with the outpatients. Now I’ll take you to my house. I am sure,’ he laughed, ‘you must be shocked at this place. It is not like Delhi or Madras. We know it should be better. But what can you do? The government allows us so little money, and it won’t paint or repair until the place is falling in ruins. After a time one gets used to it.’

Dr. Sitaraman’s house was no bigger than Videhi’s bungalow, nor very much better furnished. It was full with children, all talking Tamil. Mrs. Sitaraman was a kindly woman, younger than Videhi had expected. She made Videhi welcome.

‘I am so glad you are here,’ she said. ‘We need someone fresh and young.’

Then she asked Videhi if she knew Madras and if she liked Madrassi food.

‘I’ve had it in Kashi quite often,’ said Videhi, ‘and I like it. Our food is also hot, but not quite so hot as yours. Nearly all my life has been in the north, and I’ve got used to the northern cooking.’

‘Have you any Madrassi friends?’ asked Mrs. Sitaraman.

‘Yes,’ answered Videhi. ‘I knew several at school and two or three in Delhi. Some of our best doctors in Delhi were from Madras, of course, and then there is my friend Meenakshi, who is in the films now.’

The Sitaramans were thrilled to hear about Meenakshi.

‘We have a dreadful cinema in Chotapuri,’ said Dr. Sitaraman, ‘but we have to go to it, there is no other. We’ll take you there one day. We’ll show you all the sights of the town. It won’t take very long.’

Mrs. Sitaraman asked her if she was married, and Videhi said no. Then she was asked about her family, and she had to give the life histories of her sisters and tell about her father.

'You must think us very curious,' said Dr. Sitaraman, 'but really there is so little to do here and it is such a small place that we have to squeeze the maximum out of every new thing that comes our way.'

All this conversation went on amidst the noise and babel of the children, three boys and two girls.

'Do they go to school here?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' said Dr. Sitaraman. 'The new term will start in a day or two, luckily. They are growing up real Biharis, quite wild, but we talk Tamil at home, of course, and they have not lost their language, as you can tell only too well.'

'Has Dr. Shukla any children?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Sitaraman. 'He has four. I don't know whether you will like him or not. We don't get on well together. He drinks and he is jealous.'

'He says,' said Dr. Sitaraman, 'that the place drives him to drink.'

After the meal was over Videhi rose to go, and Dr. Sitaraman accompanied her to her bungalow. Her servant was waiting on the veranda. She had bought many vegetables and cooked her own meal. She thought the prices in the town much cheaper than in Kashi, and she had already made friends with one of the dhais. She was quite pleased with herself and the place, and she talked to Videhi for a time about it.

Videhi went to bed with very mixed feelings. She felt she ought to have written a letter home, but she was quite distressed with the physical appearance and the general air of shoddy neglect, failure lying rusting in a backwater. She knew anything she wrote now would

reflect her disappointment. Better leave it till tomorrow, she thought. She was sleeping inside the house with a fan on, for it was very hot. She felt very uncomfortable, and with the day's impressions firmly fixed in her mind and her own acute sense of disappointment she could not sleep. She looked at her watch with her torch; it was midnight. Hours seemed to pass as she tossed and turned, wondering whether she could ever make this untidy careless place into something clean and efficient of which she could be proud. She looked at her watch again; it was only one o'clock. Then she must have dozed off, for the next thing she recalled was being woken by her servant, who called her and said the dhai wanted her.

For a few moments Videhi could not understand. Then she realised that she was in hospital and that there must be some emergency in the wards. Her servant said the woman was in labour and that the dhai could not manage. Videhi went over quickly to the ward, and saw the dhai with the patient, a young girl of sixteen.

'Her pains have come on,' said the dhai. 'It will be a breech case.'

'You get the other things ready,' said Videhi. 'I will manage.'

The girl was suffering greatly and crying with the pain. Videhi felt it unlikely that the child would be saved, but she did all she could. She remembered quite clearly the textbook descriptions, and she had seen and attended several such cases in the hospital at Delhi. For a while she worked quickly and quietly, soothing the girl as best she could. She got the dhai to call a servant to take a message to the dispensary for an injection she needed. Then she realised the case was not progressing. The girl's agonies increased and the

child would not come. Fear and panic held Videhi for a few moments. She sent a note to Dr. Sitaraman asking him to come to help her. She looked at her watch and realised she had been three hours in the ward. This is my first case, she thought. It must come right. At least I must save the mother. After some minutes Dr. Sitaraman came, looking very sleepy. Videhi told him what the matter was. He looked at the girl and shook his head.

‘We’ll get the child out,’ he said, ‘but I doubt if the mother will live.’

Hurriedly they worked together, Videhi feeling sicker every minute. Everything was wrong, and the blood and the mess revolted her as though she were seeing it for the first time. They worked in quietness. The girl had more injections and her pulse was getting feebler and feebler. With the first light of dawn she died.

‘Well, that’s the end,’ said Dr. Sitaraman. ‘I’ll show you the forms you have to fill in. You’d better change and get some coffee.’

He went off.

Videhi left the dead girl to the dhai and her relatives, who had now arrived to mourn. She went back to her bungalow and saw that her sari was stained at the bottom with blood. She felt quite miserable. Her first case and failure. Was it for all this she had studied, just to watch people die in vain? What else could she have done? She could think of nothing, yet everything, she knew, was wrong. When she went over to see Dr. Sitaraman in the office he saw her distress.

‘You must not worry,’ he said. ‘We cannot do everything. Besides, what does it matter? One life among so many millions. Our country teems. It was probably better for both of them, the mother and the child.’

‘It was my first case,’ said Videhi.

'Nothing else could have been done,' said Dr. Sitaraman. 'If you had not been there I would have been called. The result would have been the same.'

'You say that to comfort me,' said Videhi.

Not at all, said Dr. Sitaraman. 'It just happens to be true.'

Videhi went back to the two wards that were specially her own. At least they shall be as clean as soap and water can make them, she told the dhais. Then she saw the patients in the general ward. One woman had scalded her arm, and another had broken her leg. Two were suffering from dysmenorrhoea, and one from cancer of the breast. She inspected them all carefully, giving them the most searching examination she could. It took time, and it was long after midday before she had finished. The dhai came to tell her there were women waiting in the outpatients' department, so she went there. She had not had a meal as yet, but the feeling of work satisfied her, and late that evening she wrote a short note home, just to say that she had arrived and was settling in. She said nothing about the hospital or the girl who had died. After the letter was written she was called out to a private case in the town. She took her bag and the dhai and her servant with her. It was another confinement. The woman was in a small room, very hot and close, and her mother and sisters were there. Videhi went in and did her work, utterly relieved to find the labour and the birth normal. It was a boy child. She left instructions with the girl's mother and went out. As she was going the husband gave her some money, and she felt almost shy to feel that she had earned it. That night when she got back she was happy. She was amused, too, to discover that her servant also had received a few rupees and was equally happy.

She soon established a routine. She had her own duties

in the women's part of the hospital, and every third night she was on general duty for all the hospital—not that there were many night calls; most of them came for her from the women's ward. Gradually, too, she was called more frequently for outside confinements. There was no question of a fee. People paid what they could or what they thought suitable. Sometimes they sent gifts, fresh fruit or vegetables, occasionally a sari. She had opened an account in the bank, and each fortnight or so she paid in the money she had earned from her private practice. Her hospital pay was quite sufficient for her own expenses.

She was getting to know the town well. It had been severely damaged in an earthquake some previous year. Many of the buildings were still derelict or mere masses of rubble. It was a dirty town, not so much poor as uncared for and dusty. Few of the roads were metalled, the drains were open, the shops dark and close, with shabby gaudy signs, and the usual colourful film advertisements and posters about love potions. The commonest form of transport was the big open four-wheeled victoria drawn by two thin horses. Videhi frequently used these. Some day, when she had saved enough money and paid back the school, she would buy a car. Though the town was ramshackle, an eyesore almost without a redeeming feature, it was small, and one could very quickly get into the open country amidst the fields and villages. Nearby was a river, a stream compared with the Ganges, but pleasant to walk alongside, and here it was always cooler than in the crowded town. Great white reeds grew thickly at the river's edge and waved their tufted tops in the wind. Women came to wash their clothes by its banks and had placed there large flat stones for beating their saris and their husbands' dhoties. Videhi took to going there each day just before sunset. There and back in the victoria

took under an hour, and she grew to love to watch the sun setting across the river and to see the dimming reflection of the clouds in the water as the light faded.

Her own bungalow she had made clean. With colourful curtains and bright straw mats and some wicker chairs it looked pleasant. She had bought a small bookshelf for herself and a dressing-table, and another at which she could write. She was hoping her mother would come in the winter with the two children, and she wanted the place to be attractive. The area was very malarial. Just after the rains the mosquitoes came in enormous numbers. She had thought that, after her experience of the comparative immunity of Delhi, Kashi was bad, but this was infinitely worse. The mosquitoes came in clouds. Each evening the servants closed all the windows in the bungalow and sprayed the place. Sometimes they burnt Japanese sulphur in thin green strips. And afterwards, to clear the air of the unpleasant smell, they burnt sweet-smelling powders.

Her days were full and she was frequently at work at nights. Most of her confinements were successful and she was growing confident, though each time initially she was nervous, for she knew that so much depended on Nature and the mother and not on herself. She began to receive calls further afield than the town, into some of the nearby villages.

There was a sugar plantation a few miles off with two or three Anglo-Indian families. They sent a car for her and she enjoyed the visits. It was good to feel that she was being called in time, and not just at the moment of confinement. The two women concerned, wives of officials on the estate, were only halfway through their pregnancy. She was shown round the estate and the factory by the husbands. She admired the thoroughness and efficiency of the organisation and the care taken of their workers.

After her first visit she went there fortnightly and enjoyed it like a social outing. Their bungalows were spacious and comfortable, with carpets and curtains and those little domestic feminine touches that were so lacking in the houses she saw in town. The menfolk teased her and offered her whisky and cigarettes, and the two ladies lent her English magazines.

She had been called to the house of a rich zemindar in a village. His was the only substantial building there. He had two elephants for work in his sugar-fields when they were removing the great loads of sugar-cane. His wife was confined and had a child, but she was weak after the birth and Videhi went several times. The household was primitive and orthodox. The zemindar was wealthy. He accepted Videhi and her advice completely. She was surprised and pleased at the position she held there. Yet it was the same almost everywhere. Conditions might be bad, people stupid or grossly ignorant, but they looked up to her and accepted her instructions and advice. She was astonished at their docility and gratitude at first, and then grew accustomed to it.

Only once on these comparatively lonely excursions, many of them at night, did she feel afraid. She always took her dhai and servant with her. She had been called out at night to a village about six miles off. The servant bearing the message to Videhi said the zemindar's wife was ill, and Videhi went expecting a confinement. When she got to the village and the zemindar's house she went in with her dhai. The man met her. He was tall and handsome, but Videhi shuddered at the cold look in his eyes and the hard line of his mouth.

'My wife is ill,' he said. 'You will attend to her.'

He led the way to a small room containing a wooden chowki richly spread with silk cloth, and on it a slight young girl lying half dazed or asleep. She was very

beautiful and fragile. Videhi touched her hand and asked her what was the matter. The girl turned and saw Videhi, and her husband behind. There was fear in her eyes, the fear of a child. She half raised herself on the chowki and pulled aside the end of her sari and opened her blouse. There was a deep wound just above her breast. Videhi did not speak. She attended to it rapidly and gently, and dressed and bandaged it.

'The wound may go septic,' she told the man, who was watching all the time. 'It would be better if you brought her to the hospital.'

'No,' said the man. 'You have treated her. She will get better. If I need you again I shall send for you.'

'The wound needs dressing daily,' said Videhi. 'Can you do it?'

'It shall be done,' said the man, and he smiled.

'I will leave a prescription,' said Videhi.

She wanted to hurry away. All through the journey back she wondered about the girl and how she had come by her wound. She heard no more of her.

There was nothing spectacular in her experiences. They were for the most part quiet and ordinary, but the variety of them and their frequency and the moving about made a great change from the formal routines of study and work at Delhi. She was continually meeting new people and began to take an interest in them as though she were observing life in a book or a dream, pleasantly and painlessly, yet with a sharper edge of reality. Her own power of introspection assisted her, and she felt that she could call herself content. Work in the hospital was neither arduous nor intensive, but it was there, regularly awaiting her, and with her growing private practice she rarely found time for idle thoughts. Sometimes she had positive pleasure from her experiences. She had been attending the wife of one of the

richer men in town and after the birth of the child and the recovery of the mother to health she received an invitation to their house in the evening. It was not far away, and she left word in the hospital where she was to be found if needed.

The house was in a narrow lane off one of the wider town streets. It was wooden-fronted and closely shuttered and had been roughly whitewashed recently. At the doorways were crude sketches in red of Shiva and Parvati. It did not look very welcome. Inside she was led to a large room that previously she had not seen. The whole floor was covered in white sheeting, and round cushions and carpets were spread about. A few other guests were there, one or two of whom Videhi already knew. Their host brought them sweets and pan and scented water, and before long some musicians came with their sitar and tablas. They looked thin, poorly clad, and they were old with lined faces, but they were clearly gifted, and they played Hindi songs and music throughout the evening. It was extremely good. The audience enjoyed it and appreciated it. Videhi loved it. She could close her eyes and listen with delight to the familiar songs. It was pleasant to dream there whilst listening to the music. She was grateful to her host and surprised at his taste, and surprised, too, at herself for being so happy.

In this way the first few months of life at Chotapuri passed on, set in the drabest surroundings, coloured with the dust and dirt of the town, yet, for all that, stimulating and giving Videhi increased confidence and greater ease of mind. She had written regularly to her mother, and Shalini had promised to come with her youngest sister, Sakuntala, to stay with her for two weeks during the school winter holidays. Videhi was looking forward keenly to this and made all the necessary preparations. She only hoped she would not

receive too many calls during that time. She did not want Shalini and Sakuntala to be bored during their stay. She had carefully arranged a programme as though it were a state visit. They would go out to the cinema twice or perhaps three times. She would invite the two doctors' families to meet her mother and they would return the invitation, and she would take them out into the countryside and to the sugar factory, and for the rest they would talk and Sakuntala could read. Videhi ordered some books from Patna that she thought her sister might like. She would also take them to the shops and buy them saris, and saris for her sisters staying in Kashi.

The visit went off very much as planned. Shalini was delighted with Videhi's bungalow and very interested in her work. They both went round the wards together once. Shalini was feeling better now, though both knew this was only a temporary alleviation. Now that she was a doctor in her own right Videhi often received samples from the agents of the big European pharmacists, and some of these she thought might be useful to Shalini or Shubha, and she gave them to her mother to take to Kashi. The feeling that she could at last give was soothing. Sakuntala, too, was happy with her books, and she told Videhi she would also like to be a doctor and to study.

'That will be quite possible,' said Videhi. 'I can help you now, only you must make up your mind seriously, though not yet. There is plenty of time to decide later.'

At night mother and daughter had long talks together. Shalini had much Kashi gossip to relate, countless details about Shubha and Vasanti and their children, and also about neighbours who had known Videhi as a child.

'Do you hear from Indira now?' asked Shalini.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'She is working as assistant to

a very successful doctor in Bombay. She says she envies me my independence here, but she seems quite pleased. I expect that she is much better equipped there, but somehow I like this place, though it is small and provincial and backward.'

'You look well,' said Shalini. 'I don't know that you look happier, but you look stronger. I used to think at Kashi that the irregular hours and the night work and living by yourself might pull you down, but they have not. You look very well.'

'I feel well, Mother,' said Videhi. 'And then, you know, work here is not really so exacting as in Delhi. That continuous study is very trying.'

'And are you happy within yourself?' asked Shalini.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'Why shouldn't I be?'

'You know quite well what I mean,' said Shalini. 'Are you reconciled to this kind of life for always?'

'It is not bad,' said Videhi. 'It is not bad at all. One does not have to struggle to reconcile oneself to it. And then I don't expect I'll stay here always; but even if I did perhaps I would not mind. It is very quiet, but very human, and I enjoy looking at things happen to people.'

'Yes,' said Shalini, 'I suppose you get lots of varied experiences, experiences that don't touch you yourself. You are like a novelist in a way, outside the rush of influences that affect the characters. That must be a pleasant feeling.'

'It is more than that,' said Videhi. 'Merely to look on and enjoy would be cold and selfish, almost cruel, certainly cruel. I can also help. At least I know what I do is part help even if it does not go the whole way.'

'What I wondered,' said Shalini, 'was whether you ever thought of helping yourself. You are busy now, and you are new to the feeling of activity, but some day you will get used to it; it will be like an old sari that does

that the two were flirting, and she knew that among the servant community the more rigid codes of her own caste did not prevail, nor did other people mind what they did. Nor did Videhi want to interfere in their private lives. She felt they had as much right to resent interference as she herself.

She did not want to see Kumari wasted on a drunkard. She spoke to Kumari one evening and asked her what she and Hira Lal intended to do.

‘Why, nothing,’ said Kumari.

‘You don’t think of getting married?’ said Videhi,

‘Perhaps,’ said Kumari.

‘He is not a good man,’ said Videhi. ‘He drinks and gambles.’

‘All men drink,’ said Kumari. ‘That is nothing. And they gamble, too, if they have any money.’

‘How can you think of marrying him then?’ asked Videhi.

‘If he loves me I would marry him,’ said Kumari.

‘He might beat you when he drinks,’ went on Videhi. ‘And then there would be the children.’

‘Of course,’ said Kumari, ‘there would be children. That is what marrying is for. If he beat me too much I would run away from him and marry someone else. It is quite easy.’

‘You could avoid all that,’ said Videhi, ‘by not marrying him at all.’

‘Who, then, will love me?’ asked Kumari. ‘I am a simple woman, not rich and a doctor like you. I must have a husband, and Hira Lal is good to me. He would love me well at first, and afterwards if he was bad I would leave him. I must have a husband. I get lonely at nights, and people say bad things of lonely women.’

‘Well,’ said Videhi, ‘you seem to know what you are doing, but I think you wrong. You could wait for a better man.’

'No,' said Kumari, 'I shall not wait. Not while I am young and Hira Lal is strong. That would be foolish. And who will find me this better man?'

Videhi spoke to Dr. Sitaraman about the two servants. He laughed and said, 'Kumari is quite right. There is no sophistication in their lives. They live like that and are not afraid of life. Of course Hira Lal drinks, and he will probably beat her, but she will do as she says, if she does not die in childbirth. She will run away and find another man. That is what these people are; they are low caste and have no morals. Perhaps they are wiser than you or I. They do not know fear or wrong or uncertainty. Hunger and violence are the worst things in their lives, and they are so used to both they ignore them. Certainly they do not look ahead in fear of them as we would.'

'It seems so wrong to me,' said Videhi.

'It is wrong,' answered Dr. Sitaraman, 'but what can we do? Aren't they happier in their crude animal state? I am sure they are, and I am sure they get far more happiness than we do out of life and out of love, but they are prepared to pay the price asked and we are not. We ask too much and get nothing.'

Videhi met both the doctors daily. She found Dr. Sitaraman rather cynical and casual, aping the intellectual, a man whose distinction, if any, lay in the past and not in the present, and who had abandoned all hope of the future. He was over forty now, his hair greying, his figure stout. He was careless of his appearance and wore white cotton drill suits until the soiled edges showed. He had adapted himself to the environment of the hospital apparently without caring or wishing to change it. For all that, Videhi did not dislike him. He had an easy manner of speech which gave one the illusion that one was sharing ideas with him. Nothing

disturbed or upset him. At first Videhi had been inwardly shocked and rather contemptuous of his carelessness, and his too ready acceptance of that which had actually happened, but she saw that it was not without its value, and in a way it atoned for his lack of competence and pure medical skill. Dr. Shukla was a more silent, reserved man. He harboured a grievance against Sitaraman and the two were not friendly, though Sitaraman was not a man with whom it was easy to quarrel. Shukla was slow in speech and in action.

He had few words and no views. He was conscientious and followed the regulations closely. Though he was far more hard-working than Sitaraman, he was not popular either with the patients or with the staff. He was without sympathy. Yet he was not interested in medicine as such, or research or study. It was the job that held him, the task assigned to him, to which he was loyally dutiful and faithful. He was reputed to drink heavily. Certainly it seemed that some dark emptiness dwelt within him which could only be assuaged by the dulling relief of a drug.

Videhi and the doctors, though meeting in the course of their duties, each had their separate work, and they were never together for very long. Though she went sometimes to see their families, it was not frequently. As with the hospital, so with the doctors she had felt depressed at first, and then with the discovery of her own work that depression wore off and she estimated them a little higher. There was, naturally, no comparison with Delhi standards. She was learning consciously how low is the general average necessary to carry on almost any work, and by and large both Shukla and Sitaraman accomplished their tasks.

Because Sitaraman was the senior and also the more fluent and communicable, she usually brought any small

medical or administrative problem to him. She felt she had a deeper insight into his personality than that of Dr. Shukla. One day, soon after she had spoken to him about Kumari, she came again to him with some query about a form required by the local authorities.

'Why do you bother?' asked Sitaraman. 'The clerks in the office will attend to it.'

'I want to know myself,' said Videhi. 'I want to be able to tell them, not to have them tell me.'

'You give yourself too much work,' said Sitaraman. 'These things are not necessary for you. I don't think you'll stay here for long.'

'Why?' asked Videhi. 'Why not?'

'You'll go away to a better place, and soon, I should think. You are not meant to rot in a hole like this.'

'It is not bad here,' said Videhi. 'I don't look on it like that at all. So long as one is working, how can one talk of rotting? Medical work is the same everywhere. If we do it well, we do our job well, and that is all.'

'No,' said Sitaraman. 'You may be right in principle, but in fact it is clear, at any rate to me, that you are meant for a wider sphere and a bigger place than this. Perhaps something quite different. You are lost and wasted here.'

'I don't believe that,' said Videhi.

'There is no need to believe it,' said Sitaraman. 'It is true, and truth is not a matter of belief, it just is. I shall be sorry to see you go, though glad for your sake.'

Videhi flushed at these words, and returned to the subject of the forms.

'They have to be filled up in triplicate, one copy to Dharbanga, and two to Patna, and there they will stay buried, useless, in files. And that is what will happen to you if you stay here. You will be lost like a folio in a file.'

'You talk as though you wanted me to go,' said Videhi, and immediately regretted her words.

‘No,’ said Sitaraman, ‘not at all. I have told you I would be sorry if you went. The hospital is different with you in it, but I don’t care about the hospital; work is different with you here, but I don’t care about the work either; it is just that into this dusty, sleepy, tired place you have come like a flower, and flowers are very welcome. You bring the promise of youth and you remind me of things that I’d thought were only possible in books: beauty, distinction, adventure, courage. Now you are here I can believe them possible in life; when you go I shall fall into forgetfulness again.’

Videhi did not answer. She took up the forms and said she must get back to her wards, and as she left Sitaraman smiled at her.

Videhi did not mind what he had told her. She found it hard to treat him as a person with real feelings. She knew that he liked to talk and echo the ideas that had filled his youth. She did not think him capable of serious emotion, and she knew that action never followed from his words. It was almost a guiding principle with him to avoid action. Yet she wondered within herself why out of casual contacts personal relationships should arise, and why these personal relationships should often be difficult and embarrassing. His words, too, had stirred within her a sense of dissatisfaction. Was her work here, after all, really enough? She put the thought away. What else was there?

Very soon after her talk with Sitaraman she was called in the evening to assist Dr. Shukla with one of his cases. She went across and did what was required, each hardly speaking to the other, both functioning impersonally. Then, as they both turned to go and stood upon the veranda of the ward with the dark night in front of them and above them, Dr. Shukla asked her why she never spoke to him.

'I do,' said Videhi. 'I don't understand you.'

'I mean,' said Dr. Shukla, 'you talk with Sitaraman, not with me.'

'That is business,' said Videhi.

'I know more about medicine than he does,' said Shukla, 'and I know more about the local rules and regulations. I can help you better than he.'

'Shall I come to you next time then?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' said Shukla. 'It would please me.'

Then as she made to go to her own bungalow he asked her to stay one moment.

'Sitaraman tells me,' he said, 'that you are going to leave us. Is that true?'

'No,' said Videhi. 'I have no intention of leaving.'

'I am glad,' said Shukla. 'Glad that you are not going, and that Sitaraman is proved again a liar.'

And without more ado he went to his own bungalow.

Immediately after this word came that the hospital was to be inspected in a few days' time by the Inspector-General of the province.

'We must get things perfect,' said Sitaraman.

'That won't be easy,' said Shukla.

Nevertheless Sitaraman gave his orders and there was frenzied cleaning and whitewashing. The compound was tidied up, and the verandas cleaned of cobwebs and refuse. Videhi did not have much to worry about, for she had already effected all the possible changes in her two wards.

'The Inspector-General is a tartar,' said Sitaraman. 'I shall not sleep until his visit is over. I hate these inspections. They find everyone out.'

Still, they provoked activity for the two doctors and the hospital staff. The servants were pleased, for they were getting clean new uniforms for the occasion.

'Will he stay long?' asked Videhi.

'No,' was the answer. 'Only long enough to see what he wants. Then he'll go off to the Commissioner's bungalow for lunch and we shall be free.'

'The day of inspection came. It did not take long to tour the hospital. It was small enough. Videhi was sure it would be a success, for the place really looked clean and smart, and it smelt sweet. She was waiting in her ward for the Inspector-General, and he soon came, followed by his entourage. He asked Videhi if she was new there and from where she had come. She told him.

'Now,' he said, 'take me round your wards.'

There were three women in the maternity ward and ten in the general ward. He asked Videhi about each case and what she knew of each patient. She told him. One of the expectant mothers was a young girl of seventeen, the wife of one of the labourers in the sugar factory.

'She will be quite well, I think,' said Videhi. 'I have seen her several times at the sugar factory. This will be her first child, and she says if it is a girl she will call it after me.'

Another was a woman who had already had four children, but each had died within a few months of birth.

'She is the wife,' said Videhi, 'of a tailor in the town. She helps her husband with his sewing, and they are consumptive with the close atmosphere and the cotton threads. They need prolonged diet, both of them. I feel nervous about the mother. She is very weak. She should not have children at all really, but she is so keen to bear a child that will survive. It is all she wants. And the husband too. He is quite gentle and affectionate, but they must have a child, he tells me. I told him they must both make themselves strong enough first.'

The third woman Videhi believed would be difficult.

‘It would be better to operate,’ said Videhi, ‘but the woman is unwilling and so is her husband. He says the baby must come naturally. I told him it is very doubtful if it will, but that if we operate we will most probably be successful. He won’t listen. He is quite a rich man. He has several victorias in the town, and owns two or three shops as well.’

The Inspector listened to all this and then went to the other ward, where again he asked Videhi for the story of each case. It took quite a time to tell and the others in the party were fidgeting, but the end came and the Inspector thanked Videhi and went away.

Later Videhi asked Sitaraman what the result was.

‘He was quite pleased with your wards,’ said Sitaraman, ‘and he complimented me on getting the hospital clean. “That’s why we come,” he said. But there was nothing wrong that he could see, and when I explained to him in the office about the financial grants he told me to write in about it. They all do that. They say they’ll give it their personal attention, but they seldom do. However, this time I think he will, thanks to you.’

‘Why to me?’ asked Videhi.

‘He liked you,’ said Sitaraman. ‘He noticed you. He stayed longer in your wards with your thirteen patients than in the whole of the rest of the hospital. He’s seen these places so many times and knows the sort of cases we have.’ He was not eager either to learn or to impress us with his zeal. He found you a relief during a very boring job and stayed as long as he could. I am going to write my letter now, and if we get the extra money we will thank you, and I shall put in for money for your wards just to refresh his memory.’

There were flowers in Videhi’s garden now, roses and jasmin. Her bungalow was a bright and attractive spot in the hospital compound. She was refreshed herself to

come back to it. In the evenings she would sit on her veranda writing letters home or just relaxing. It was warm, but not as hot as in Kashi. They were nearer here to the foothills of the Himalayas. With the summer came the lichees, a fruit she had not known in Kashi but which was common in Bihar. She liked them herself and sent a basket of them by rail to her mother. She also sent some money to the Principal of her old school. She was anxious not to feel indebted.

All these things put together gave Videhi a feeling of stability and assuredness. She realised that both Sitaraman and Shukla were attracted to her, but the discovery in no way distressed her. She was able to consider it impersonally and almost with indifference. Videhi knew that she herself was secure, and from this position of safety she felt that she could not be shaken. She remembered Prem Nath, but there was no anguish in her memory. It had been months since she had experienced any keen bitter longings. Videhi had reached the stage now, she told herself, where she could carry on happily with the memory of Prem Nath. Videhi felt certain she was content with that sufficiency. Her work interested her, and she delighted in it, and she was glad that it was of such a nature as to make constant calls on her so that time was rarely left vacant. That there was a fear of time, she knew; but so long as she could overcome it by the normal round of her duties she did not, would not, stop to investigate its roots.

She comforted herself in her daily tasks with two watchwords—courage and common sense. Whatever happens we must face it bravely. Whatever happens we must treat it in proper proportion and not exaggerate either its goodness or its badness. With these words and this attitude she felt that she could get through life safely and happily and bring relief and benefit to others. Each

day she would whisper the words to herself. We invent life's difficulties, she thought, and a kind of inward fear, half pride, half foolishness, leads us to exaggerate them. Here in the hospital we are face to face with stark reality, the pain and anguish of the suffering body.

So Videhi reasoned and felt it true, or at least sufficiently true. I know, at any rate, she thought, my own limitations, and there is very little that I ask—a little kindness in myself towards others, and a little sweetness and beauty in my own surroundings, and work to do; others to help, but not to interfere. I don't want anything big. I don't want fame. I don't want to embark on any great schemes. I know our provincial service is poor. I know the service as a whole in India is mediocre, and I know the desperate need of the country for improvements, but I don't want my sense of the need to falsify the view. Within my own circle I shall do what I can, but more I shall not try nor dream of, nor shall I wish to enlarge my circle. I am content.

For a long time she had not received a letter from Indira. She had answered the last one written to her and told Indira about her life in Chotapuri, but she did not write again although several weeks had elapsed. Any obtrusion on others she felt would be false to her nature, and if Indira needed her she would write—not that she could need her. One day in June, however, when she had very nearly completed her first year in the hospital and had grown to feel rooted there, she got a letter from Indira:

'My dear Videhi,

You must forgive me for not writing to you for all these months, but I have been busy with my work, as I expect you have been busy, and so many things have happened to me. I met Meenakshi again in Bombay at

a party and quite by accident. She has not changed in the least, is still vivacious and happy, and overflowing with love. She is going to have a child. She has made arrangements to go into a private nursing home in Bombay, and she will have one of our most expensive doctors. It was so nice to see Meenakshi again, and hear her sing. I told her where you were, and she wondered why you are lost in the wilds of Bihar; "but they won't be wild now with Videhi present," she said. I wanted to tell you about Meenakshi, but even more about myself, for that is the reason why I did not write all these months. My dear Videhi, I am going to get married soon, to a doctor, a psychologist. So I will stay in Bombay all the time, and you must come to see us both when you have leave. Quite by accident I met him, and quite quietly we suddenly seemed to fall in love with each other. I never thought it possible, Videhi, but it happened, and I am so happy. I shall continue with my own work, of course, for a time, but I do not think much about work now, though I like it. I think of marriage and my home and my children and my husband, and that is more than enough to think upon. We are going to get married in October. For various reasons it cannot be sooner. Do you think it will be possible for you to come to the wedding? I shall, of course, invite you, but I would like you very much to be present. I am sure Bombay will be a pleasant change for you for a while from Bihar and your villagers and zemindars. Do write to me and tell me that you can come.

Your ever loving,

Indira.

PS. Please tell your family about this and give them my best wishes.'

Videhi was pleased at the letter and then a little resentful that both Meenakshi and Indira should think so poorly of the place she was in. After all, Bihar was quite good. Then she laughed to herself and wondered who was the more provincial—they for thinking so highly of the big cities like Bombay and despising the up-country towns, or she for wishing to defend the provinces? As if there was any difference that mattered. She was glad to hear about both of them, and wrote a short note congratulating Indira. She could not say yet about her leave, or whether she would be able to be present at the wedding, but she wanted to come and she would try.

The next morning, when she saw Dr. Sitaraman at the office, she asked about the leave.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘it will be quite possible, though it is awkward for the hospital without you, and we could not spare you for long unless it was something very urgent.’

‘I want to go to Bombay,’ said Videhi—‘that means nearly two days’ travelling each way—and I would like to stay there for a week.’

‘Yes,’ said Dr. Sitaraman, ‘that will be all right. Ten days would do, I think.’

‘Yes,’ said Videhi. ‘I don’t know the exact dates yet, for my friend has not told me when the marriage will take place.’

‘You are not going to get married yourself, are you?’ asked Sitaraman suddenly and with concern.

‘No,’ said Videhi. ‘It is my friend. She is a doctor now in Bombay. We were students together in Delhi. She is going to marry another doctor, a psychologist.’

‘Well,’ said Sitaraman, ‘I am glad it is not you. We don’t want to lose you so soon. Still, I don’t know that I approve of that kind of marriage when both are in the

same profession. In some ways I am old-fashioned about marriage and think it is a full-time job for a woman.'

'It can be,' said Videhi. 'In most cases it is, but not out of choice, only out of habit and necessity rather.'

'They are the ruling gods,' said Sitaraman. 'If we defy those we do so at our own peril. You are quite right, of course. I dare say they will be happy. Bombay is a modern place and tolerant of modern ideas, but then I was not thinking so much of that. Most marriages, you know, become rather dreary. But they should begin well.'

'What is a good beginning?' asked Videhi.

'Why, it is quite simple and also old-fashioned. They should begin by believing they live for each other, and for each other alone. They can hardly do that if both are working, for then they have both got other interests.'

'Work need not conflict with love,' said Videhi.

'No, it need not,' said Sitaraman, 'but unfortunately it does. I don't see how one can ignore that fact. It takes away energy and it takes away time, quite apart from other things.'

'One cannot be loving for twenty-four hours,' said Videhi, 'and in any case the husband must be away.'

'Yes, yes,' said Sitaraman, 'But I am a sentimentalist. The husband will be away working for his wife and thinking of her, and the wife will be at home waiting for him and thinking of him. In that way the bond of sentiment between them is strengthened. That is how it should begin. If it ends as most of them do end, they can feel that they have something to remember.'

'I don't believe in sentiments,' said Videhi, 'and I don't believe in the past. The living now is the only thing.'

'Only when it is worth while,' said Sitaraman, 'not when it is soiled and ugly and wearisome. You are too

young yet to realise that the present can be worse than the past, and the future worse than the present. That is the lot of people who fail, and most of us fail, Videhi; then we look back on the past and we treasure our sentiments, however silly. Now you say it, I suppose it is because we are like that initially that we fail. The weakness is there from the start.'

'I don't think you know what it is to fail,' said Videhi. 'Nor can life be divided between failure and success. For most of living neither word applies, and most living can still be tolerant and pleasant.'

'That is because Nature's instinct to live is stronger than our own realisation of our weakness. We carry on with whatever inadequate tools, but we know they are inadequate, and we know, too, what failure is. I do. I know it of myself. I have reached a stage beyond which I shall never pass, and when I was young I would have despised it utterly—to be confined to a small provincial hospital and to have on one's hands a growing family, and to see no escape. But we have work to do,' and he broke off. 'Let me know about your leave dates and we will arrange it.'

In the cool of the same evening Videhi was sitting on her veranda reading. Somehow in the hot summer months work was less. When the monsoon came the fevers and sicknesses increased, and the cold months brought a greater number of babies. She had more leisure now, and she was grateful, for it was hot to be constantly moving about. She was thinking of having a cool bath and changing into a fresh sari before having her dinner when Dr. Sitaraman came up.

'Do you mind,' he said, 'if I come in?'

'Not at all,' said Videhi. 'Please sit down.'

'I came,' said Sitaraman, 'to explain, in case you might have misunderstood me this morning.'

‘There is nothing to misunderstand,’ said Videhi. ‘I did not think about it again. When I know my friend’s wedding date I shall tell you and ask for leave at that time.’

‘Not about the leave, not about the leave,’ said Sitaraman. ‘It is because you did not think about it again that I came. Of course you can have your leave. You are entitled to it. There is no act of grace there. What I meant was that I was half telling you something very true and it meant nothing to you. How old do you think I am?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Videhi, looking very surprised.

‘I am forty-four,’ said Sitaraman. ‘I have five children and a wife. She is my second wife, you know. My first wife died young. Two or three years later I married again, and now I am a doctor in charge of this hospital, and I know what sort of reputation I have, for though I am not clever, I am intelligent enough to see myself. I see myself as an easygoing, lazy, careless man, tolerant of inefficiency because I am inefficient myself, and I shall never be anything different, Videhi. I know it, and my wife knows it, and my children as they grow up will also know it, but they’ll probably be like me and will tolerate their rather useless father. I am telling you all this to be very frank with you, Videhi.’

‘You are being quite frank,’ said Videhi. ‘I wish you would not say these things. They are not really true.’

‘Of course they are true,’ said Sitaraman. ‘As a judgement they are true. I dare say they do not present a complete picture. I dare say there are some minor points in my favour that I have overlooked, some mitigating circumstances, one might say.’ He laughed. ‘You are making this incident comic, Videhi,’ he said.

‘I suppose it is. What I want to say is, here I am, old enough to be your father, and a broken man and a much-married man, and yet, and yet . . .’ He stopped, hesitant. ‘And yet you make me love you.’

‘I don’t make you,’ said Videhi.

‘Who does?’ asked Sitaraman. ‘If it is not you or I, then it is fate. It does not matter. I don’t want to love you, Videhi, but I cannot help it. I am terrified of it. I know you cannot love me. I know you are too kind and understanding to despise me. I don’t want this love which has come to me, and yet you know, Videhi, it is just ridiculous. I have dreamed of a great love, and a beautiful, marvellously beautiful woman like you, fascinating, clever, kind, and yet remote, and now my dream has come true and I am afraid of it. I don’t want to realise the dream because I am afraid. I want to keep my quiet humdrum life that I have so often despised. I came to tell you and ask your help. Treat me as though I were one of your patients, Videhi.’

‘What can I do?’ asked Videhi. ‘I don’t think there is anything necessary for me to do. You have explained it all so clearly, you should see the answer yourself.’

‘You mean you do not believe me?’ said Sitaraman. ‘You don’t think that I love you?’

‘Yes,’ said Videhi. ‘If you say it I believe it. But you have said yourself that nothing can come of it, and you want your own home life. It is there waiting for you. There is no problem.’

‘Is that all you would say to your patient, Videhi?’ asked Sitaraman.

‘Yes,’ said Videhi, ‘that is all I will say to this patient, and now you should go and forget what you have said to me just now. I shall also forget it.’

‘No,’ said Sitaraman. ‘I was wrong earlier on when I said you would not despise me. You do despise me.’

You are ashamed that I should confess love to you; ashamed that I should tell you I am afraid of it. You are quite right. Videhi is always right. But my words do not mean what they said, Videhi.'

Videhi looked at him.

'You understand, Videhi?' he asked.

'Yes, I understand,' she said, 'and you know already the answer. You'd better go home now.'

'Have not you ever loved, Videhi?' asked Sitaraman. 'Are you quite cold?'

'That is nothing to do with you,' said Videhi. 'Go home to your wife and forget all this, and I shall forget. You really must go.'

Sitaraman got up. 'I shall go, Videhi. I knew it would be fruitless. I was born to be a failure. I shall go and love my wife, and she will wonder at the renewed passion and perhaps be pleased.'

And he went before Videhi could express her anger at his last words. When they met next morning Sitaraman smiled at her and said, 'We are fellow doctors again, are we not, Videhi?'

Videhi did not answer, and in the days that followed no further reference was made.

The incident had disturbed Videhi and she felt a discontent. Whether it was herself, or the work, or the place, she could not tell. It was as though Sitaraman's childish outburst had broken down the protecting walls she had so carefully built up round herself. She did not think about Sitaraman. She was not angry with him, nor did she despise him; she did not take him sufficiently seriously for that. She wondered again at the strange turns life might have, and she felt angry with herself that she should be so attractive to men and then curious to know whether the anger was real, or whether it was another disguise shielding the loneliness of her life. If

only Prem Nath had lived, she thought. And again that night when alone she recalled Prem Nath and their hopes and fears together and all the anguish she herself had suffered. She noted that when she thought of Prem Nath now it was as a defence, a shield, and no longer with the sense of positive longing, the urgency to be with him, the need for him, and for him alone. How could it be like that? she asked herself. Prem Nath is dead these many years, and all my dreams are dead too. Then she rebuked herself for self-pity. Anything but that. That must not come. I must preserve my strength against self-pity, but somehow it creeps in and gnaws away at me. What defence have I against that?

Two months had passed and it was early August. She had written to Indira that she would be able to come in October, but Indira still had not fixed the date of her wedding. She found herself waiting for this news almost anxiously. One day Mrs. Sitaraman came to her bungalow. Like her husband, she asked if she could come in.

‘Of course,’ said Videhi. ‘I will get some coffee made for you,’ and she called her servant. ‘Please sit down, Mrs. Sitaraman. It is not often you come here.’

‘No,’ answered Mrs. Sitaraman. ‘I am so busy in the house. With five children there is always work to do.’

‘Yes,’ said Videhi. ‘It was like that in my mother’s house. But they grow up, Mrs. Sitaraman, and then you will feel very proud of them, and you won’t regret the troubles you have had with them. You will have forgotten them.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Mrs. Sitaraman. ‘But I did not come to tell you that. I came to you really professionally, Videhi. You see, I think I am going to have another child.’

‘Yes?’ queried Videhi.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Sitaraman. ‘I am quite certain myself, but I want to make sure, and then . . .’

‘Yes?’ asked Videhi. ‘And then?’

‘I don’t want another child, Videhi,’ said Mrs. Sitaraman. ‘I have had enough. There are five children in the house already. I am not afraid of childbirth. I know it well enough. And I love my children. Another child now means more years of care for the little one, and all my other children, even the youngest, are now at school. I have got used to their going. I can see them growing up.’

‘Have you told Dr. Sitaraman?’ asked Videhi.

‘No,’ said Mrs. Sitaraman. ‘I don’t want to tell him, not whilst you are here. I don’t know how much you understand, Videhi. I have had five children, but I am not old. Being always a mother means one loses much. One loses one’s husband in some ways. I’ve felt that in the past. I don’t want it to happen again. I want to be a wife to my husband, and if I’m a mother it is just not possible. I want to be back with my husband. You know, people get a little tired of each other after years together, and children in a cramped house get between husband and wife. Just now it is good and we are very happy. I feel as though my husband were loving me now as in the beginning, but another baby would stop that. Babies always bored him, and then he says clever unkind things and it makes me unhappy, and I am sure it makes him unhappy too. So you see why I want your help.’

‘We must find out first,’ said Videhi, ‘and then I think you must tell Dr. Sitaraman; it is only fair to him. In fact it is essential. Let us drink our coffee.’

Then they talked for a while about other things, and about Videhi’s leave and her friend’s marriage, and what life in Bombay would be like.

This was the first time she had been faced with a moral problem arising out of her work as a doctor. Though she knew that the medical code was treated sometimes with laxity in India, it was still there. For herself, she felt that to interpret the code always with strictness to the letter was unreasonable and wrong. She was not really perplexed on that issue. It might not be a case of pregnancy but merely of delayed period; that, however, she would very soon know. What did perplex her was the intermingling of herself into this problem. And because she was so involved she was the more unwilling to talk to Dr. Sitaraman about it. She would do nothing, however, without his knowledge. She went to him and said, 'Dr. Sitaraman, your wife has just been to see me.'

'Yes,' said Sitaraman. 'What is the matter?'

'She thinks,' said Videhi, 'that she is pregnant.'

'It is quite likely,' said Sitaraman.

'She did not come to me to find out only,' said Videhi. 'She knows as well as anyone, and she is quite certain herself. But she told me she did not want another baby. She asked me to tell you that. I think you should talk to her about it.'

'Of course,' said Dr. Sitaraman. 'There is no problem there. Did she say why?'

'You should ask her that yourself,' said Videhi, 'but she did tell me. She said another baby should take time away from her that she wanted to spend on you.'

'I see,' said Sitaraman. 'Thank you for telling me.'

Videhi went away surprised that it had passed off so impersonally and quickly. She was glad it was over; glad, too, at the simple frankness of Mrs. Sitaraman. Those two, she thought, really love each other. I suppose with many ordinary people there is real affection;

not only that others do not see, but that they do not see themselves. She began to think about her mother and Ganesh. It struck her that though she thought she knew her parents thoroughly, yet she had never been conscious of them as lovers, nor even felt that there had been great love between them. Yet there must have been, and there still was, and to themselves they were probably first and foremost lovers. How blind we can be to what is so close to us!

She felt still dissatisfied, and she was anxious to hear from Indira. She realised that whereas previously for many years there had been breaks and holidays in her life, now for a whole year she had been in the same place and at the same task and that she was tired. She wanted to go to Bombay. She wanted the change. It would do her good. It would refresh her for the return to the hospital. She could not say she had been overworked, but she had worked hard, and she suddenly felt the need to go away. I need the physical change, she told herself. I've been disturbing myself unnecessarily and worrying about myself when all that is needed is the simple prescription of rest and change. I thought I was getting into a rut. I thought I was growing cold to love. I thought even, for a moment, that I was becoming indifferent to Prem Nath. All that is wrong. It is just that I am tired.

The resolution that this was so gave her strength, and she went about more happily buoyed up by the thought of Bombay and the relief it would bring her. She wrote to Indira to tell her that she was ready and waiting and eager to come, and immediately after she had written and posted the letter a black fear descended on her lest the wedding might not take place at all and she not go to Bombay. I could still go, she thought. Indeed all the more reason to go to comfort Indira. Though she told

herself that, she knew somehow the wedding must take place. It was that to which she was looking forward. She felt it as necessary for herself as for Indira, and she could not explain why. That night she was restless and could not sleep. She kept turning over in her mind she thought that the wedding would not happen, that Indira would be disappointed again. What have I to do with it? she thought. Indira is my friend, a close friend, indeed my closest; but is it so very much to me? Then she rebuked herself for selfishness, and then again thought how strange and uncertain love could be. What is really in my mind is the desire to see the strength of love proved, the goodness of life proved. Somehow I have got Indira's marriage fixed as a symbol of that, and if it fails then love fails and marriage. That is childish, she thought. It is primitive. It is not logical or rational at all. Why should it be rational? Perhaps it is deeper than that. Love and marriage are not things in themselves that can fail or succeed. What I really mean is that if Indira is happy I will be happy; if she is reconciled, then I will be reconciled. Reconciled, she repeated. Reconciled to what? I am already reconciled. I have accepted everything. Then she thought, how wrong I am, even about myself. I did not accept my marriage. I did not accept love. I do not even accept work. I am still uncertain about all these. I still hold back in fear. If only I could get rid of fear, peace would come. With all these thoughts constantly and continuously in her head she could not sleep. She went over them again and again. Tired at last of turning in her bed, she got up and stood out in the veranda, looking at the dark sky, breathing in the cooler air, and watching again the stars. They are travellers' stars, she thought, looked at by men wandering across the desert or by men at sea, fixed things of beauty gazing at the moving, changing men;

and they are lovers' stars filling them with hope. Then she went in and almost at once sank into sleep untroubled by dreams.

Chapter Twenty-six

TWO OR three days later Videhi received the letter from Indira that she had so long been expecting:

'My dear Videhi,

I was so glad to have your letter. We are going to be married on October 2nd, and it will be a civil marriage, so there won't be a great deal of ceremony. We will go away to Mahabaleshwar for seven days immediately after our wedding. That is all we can spare from our work, but it will be enough. I tell Ramesh that we will be together afterwards all the time. I would like you to come on the 24th or 25th of September. You will stay, of course, in my home. Please let me know if you can come, and the time. I will keep all the news until then. It is not so very long, about five weeks. You will understand that I count the time eagerly. I am so happy, Videhi.

Your loving

Indira.'

Videhi was also happy. She felt as though the letter were a promise of good news. She still retained strongly the almost superstitious feeling that the wedding was a sign and symbol for herself as well as Indira. She went to Dr. Sitaraman and told him she knew now definitely about the leave dates, and fixed up with him about her formal application.

‘You are very pleased,’ said Dr. Sitaraman. ‘I have never seen you look so happy before.’

‘Yes,’ said Videhi. ‘I need the leave, I realise that quite strongly, and I am anxious to see my friend again and to see her married. I am looking forward to that extremely.’

‘It will do you good,’ said Sitaraman, ‘but, you know, the return won’t be so pleasant. You will think then even more poorly of this place.’

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘I don’t think that at all. I don’t think poorly of it now, nor shall I then. I know it is different from the big cities, but I don’t mind.’

‘You say that,’ said Dr. Sitaraman, ‘but you will find it different when you come back, if you come back.’

‘Of course I shall come back,’ said Videhi.

‘I wonder,’ said Sitaraman. ‘You are so excited about your leave I can hardly believe it is just for the pleasure of seeing your friend. However, I am glad to see you so happy.’

The next few weeks went by rapidly with normal routine, and Videhi all the time occupied and eager. It was as though she had a great thirst and knew it soon would be satisfied. It was like, waiting for the first fall of the monsoon, certain that it would come, certain that it would drench the parched earth, certain that it would bring relief and ease and coolness and the return of new life. New life not only for Indira, though she was glad her friend’s soft, loving nature had met with response, but for herself. It means as much to me as to her, she thought.

On the train from Chotapuri to Lucknow, and from Lucknow to Bombay her excitement was sustained and her pleasure intense. She thought to herself of all the lovely classical marriages she had known. Indira and Ramesh had become to her Sita and Rama, or Sakuntala

and her king, or Mira Bai meeting her lord and lover and god. She had always liked travelling long distances, for the other end had always been a lodestone, Kashi her home, Delhi where Prem Nath was. The material discomforts, the heat and the dust, the crowds at the stations, and the uncomfortable sleeping never troubled her. She was going to the wedding of her friend. Love, after all, was not without reward. And it was good to pass through the land and see field after field green and fresh, with trees in the distance, and the village huts huddled together, and the people working on the land. They, too, at the end of their day's work would return home to love. She liked to catch a scene—women at the well, or men weaving outside their houses on a stretch of flat ground, or the bullock cart slowly creaking along the rough footway, or the children playing near a little temple—and then make some story for herself around it. As the train went on she liked to imagine what it might have been in the past; richer, perhaps, and even more colourful, but still lovely and still unchanged from older times beyond memory. Not only did she enjoy all this, but there were the thoughts, too, of Indira. She was not curious about Ramesh. Indira had said very little about her husband. The wedding was Indira's, not Ramesh's, and all her thoughts were for Indira. She did not hope for her friend's happiness, she knew it would come. She felt that inevitable.

At Bombay she went straight by taxi to Indira's address. This was a big house in the wealthy part of the city's suburbs. Indira was there with her mother.

'How good it is to see you, Videhi,' she said. 'It is like old days, only better, for these are new.'

She took Videhi to her room, talking all the way about the arrangements they had made.

'There are only a few days left,' she said. 'I have

counted all the days so jealously and yet so happily. I am afraid you will be very rushed, but I know you will not mind. And we will find time to talk alone together. Tonight you will meet Ramesh at dinner, then tomorrow I want to take you into Bombay to see the shops. We are having some friends in the evening, then the day after we are going to Ramesh's house for lunch, and there will be another party at night. We will have a quiet day, and after that the wedding. Were you surprised when you heard it was to be a civil wedding?'

'No,' said Videhi. 'I did not think about that at all. Is it your idea or Ramesh's?'

'We both want it,' said Indira. 'A proper Hindu wedding is so formal and public and rather terrifying, though I don't think I would really mind that. But so far as we are concerned it will be a Hindu wedding in secret. We believe in it. Our wedding is also for life.'

'Are any of our friends from Delhi coming?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' said Indira. 'I have sent them all invitations. Two or three of them are in Bombay and Poona, so it will be easy for them to come. I expect the others will just write. All my mother's people will be there, of course. They are happy about it.'

'You will have quite a big party,' said Videhi.

'Yes,' said Indira. 'We can hardly avoid that. We will have the party in our house after the wedding, but at the wedding itself there will be few. It will take place in the magistrate's bungalow. He is a friend of ours. Mother will be there, and you and my uncle and two of Ramesh's friends. That will only take a few minutes.'

'And you will both work afterwards?' asked Videhi.

'Yes,' answered Indira. 'What would I do at home? Certainly for a while I shall work until we have children, then it will be different.'

That evening Videhi met Ramesh. He was nearly forty, very well dressed and well built, wearing completely European clothes. He had studied both in London and Vienna, and he was a pleasant speaker. He entertained them that evening with tales of his studies abroad and the idiosyncrasies of professors under whom he had worked. She felt it a little difficult to penetrate beneath the surface of his culture, and she did not detect in either of them any romance. But why should there be in my presence? she thought. Ramesh asked Videhi about herself and her work in Chotapuri.

'That is the best place to begin in,' he said. 'You get at once introduced to the realities of our Indian scene. Of course there are many drawbacks and deficiencies, but they can be overcome only when people like you go to the mofussil, and not by decrying it from the safe vantage of big cities. For myself,' he went on, 'I really am a luxury. I believe in my branch of science, but it is so obvious that just now one can only practise it amongst the rich.'

'Still, that also is a beginning,' said Videhi. 'I like psychology myself, but really maternity work and all that comes easier and more natural.'

The evening passed away in quiet conversation mainly between Videhi and Ramesh, with Indira and her mother adding a word now and again. At ten o'clock Ramesh got up and said good night, and asked Indira to remember their engagement for lunch later in the week. He drove away in his car.

'What do you think of him?' asked Indira as soon as Ramesh had gone.

'Why,' said Videhi, 'he is very nice. That is really all I can say. He is obviously clever and successful and likely to be more successful. I am sure you will be very happy.'

'I want you to like him,' said Indira.

'I do,' answered Videhi. 'At least as far as one can after such a short acquaintance.'

'It is not easy to judge a man,' said Indira. 'You can see how he behaves in public, you can tell what he thinks by his speech, and then, of course, his friends. I don't say that I know Ramesh fully, but I know enough to trust him utterly, and he is very affectionate.'

'I thought Ramesh would have been younger,' said Videhi.

'He is thirty-eight,' said Indira. 'That is not old.'

'No, of course not,' said Videhi.

'He is grown-up, mature,' said Indira. 'I think that is what a husband should be, not a mere boy.'

'And are you grown-up too?' asked Videhi, laughing.

'Yes,' said Indira. 'You know quite well that women are always grown-up.'

Soon after this Indira's mother went to bed and left the two girls talking. They spoke far into the night: about their Delhi friends, about Indira's future, about the house she was going to live in, about the dress she was going to wear.

'I must give you my gift now,' said Videhi. 'It is not much, not what it ought to be for you, but you know how little we earn in the mofussil. But I am sure you will like it.'

They went up to Videhi's room and she took out a Benarsi sari in silver and blue and a country sari in black and red and gold.

'I got you something very sophisticated,' said Videhi, 'and something very primitive.'

'They are lovely,' said Indira. 'Do you mind if I wear one of these tomorrow?'

'Not at all,' said Videhi. 'They are yours now, and I would like to see you with one of them on.'

Indira touched the soft georgette and muslin gently.

‘You have not said anything about yourself, Videhi.’

‘This is your day,’ said Videhi. ‘It is you we can and must talk about. I have been so happy expecting this visit, and so happy to find you well, and I am glad for both your sakes. And somehow, too, I don’t know how, it means happiness for me.’

Next day Indira and Videhi went out to see the Bombay shops. They were good, but she was not attracted very much to the city. It was busier than Delhi and far more active. She was very much aware of the constant streams of fast-moving traffic on the broad straight roads. For all that Bombay seemed alert and modern, she thought it without presence. She was explaining this to Indira.

‘In Bombay you have a vast Indian slum spread out on a network of modern streets. Half the houses are flats and Western, and the whole is characterless.’

Indira laughed. ‘I have grown up in Bombay,’ she said. ‘I’ve got used to it. I won’t argue with you now. Let us see some more shops. Would you like to see the bookshops?’

‘That would take time,’ said Videhi.

‘It is something you won’t see easily elsewhere,’ said Indira. ‘Let us go into this shoe shop. They have good sandals here, and then we’ll go to a bookshop. There’s a good one near the station, and then we’ll take a taxi and drive to the sea-front. „We’ll have lunch out. I told Mother we would not be in until after lunch.’

So it went on. Videhi was rather nervous of the traffic, but she was pleased with the bookshop, though it contained far too much to see. She left her address there and asked them to send her their monthly catalogues. She thought she might be able to come again once before she left Bombay to buy a book, either for Sakuntala or for herself. She went with Indira to the sea-front and

stood on Ballard Pier and smelled for the first time the salt sea air and the peculiar odour of the muddied water near the port edge. In dock at the pier was a great P. and O. liner in white and red, and further out a troopship.

‘So that is the sea,’ Videhi said.

‘Oh,’ said Indira, ‘you must see it from the west coast, or even the beach at Kolaba. This is only a little bit of water at the port side.’

‘No,’ said Videhi, ‘it is the sea, and the one road to all the world. Now that I have seen it I shall come back to it. The River Ganges is wonderful; it has power and it is a great expanse of water, and rushing quickly or slowly in summer or in winter it is always beautiful, but this sea is the round earth and washes the sky. I see now that I was wrong about Bombay. No place by the sea can be without character.’

‘You are like a child,’ said Indira.

‘Yes,’ said Videhi. ‘You forget I have never seen the sea before. All I knew of Bombay before was its railway station, but this—this is different. You must bring me here again, Indira.’

‘Yes,’ said Indira. ‘But now I think we must go back home.’

All the way back in the taxi Videhi was blind to the busy streets with their crowds of people and the endless traffic. Neither the noise nor the dust touched her. She was thinking only of the sea and the curved stretch of waters reaching to the sky, and the great boats that went on it to the west.

Whilst they were having tea with Indira’s mother, Indira chaffed Videhi.

‘She has fallen in love, Mother,’ she said. ‘Fallen in love with the sea.’

‘I have never seen anything so beautiful,’ said Videhi. ‘I envy those who have the sea at hand.’

That evening more guests were due to arrive for dinner.

'They are friends of the family,' said Indira. 'They all know Ramesh and myself. I think you will like them. They are not dull. There is a doctor and his wife, one of the University professors with his two daughters, a lawyer whom Ramesh knows, and two of our Bombay cousins. How many is that?

She counted them.

'The professor is a great friend of ours,' continued Indira. 'He is just like a professor in the books, quite absentminded. Unless you invite him with his two daughters you'll be certain not to see him. They, however, will bring him along. And the lawyer is good too. He is a criminal lawyer and very clever. Do you touch medical jurisprudence at all in your hospital, Videhi?'

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'I have one or two cases a month. I have to go to the court and give my evidence. I was very nervous at first.'

They chatted on until it was time to bathe and change. Videhi had brought her best saris with her, and she was happy to wear them. It was nice to be free for once and to be able to enjoy wearing good clothes and to delight in their colour. She asked Indira what she was going to wear.

'Tonight,' said Indira, 'I shall wear a white silk sari.'

'Shall I wear my black one, then?' said Videhi.

'Yes,' said Indira.

Then they dressed and put jasmin in their hair, and went down to await the guests.

'You are both very beautiful tonight,' said Indira's mother. 'It is a pity Ramesh cannot see you both.'

'He will see us the day after tomorrow, Mother,' said Indira.

The first guests arrived; it was the professor and his daughters. He saw the two girls and went to Videhi.

'I congratulate you,' he said, 'on a happy choice, but I am sure no-one can deserve anyone so lovely as you are.'

'This is my friend Videhi,' said Indira quickly. 'She has come to be present at my wedding.'

'Have I made a mistake?' said the professor. 'I am so sorry. Of course I ought to have recognised Indira. Have you been long in Bombay?' he asked Videhi.

'I have just come,' said Videhi, blushing, for she felt a little upset at his first remarks. 'I have passed through Bombay before, but this is the first time I have seen it.'

'And where do you live?' continued the professor.

'I work in Bihar,' said Videhi. 'I am a doctor there.'

'There were never such doctors in my youth,' said the professor. 'What have I missed! I wanted my daughters to learn a profession, but they would not. They said they had enough work to do looking after me. Probably they are right.'

Meanwhile some of the other guests arrived, and they moved about slowly. The servant brought whisky for the men and soft drinks for the ladies. The hum of conversation grew. Videhi enjoyed it. They were all clever people, but still very kindly. Most of them knew Indira's mother better than they did Indira. Videhi thought Indira and herself must be the youngest present.

Soon their other guests came, and Videhi and Indira were the centre of a gay, happy, chatting throng. Videhi liked their conversation, half witty, half sophisticated, but very friendly. Indira was lucky to belong to such a circle as this. How different it was from dusty, quiet Chotapuri! She must not think of that. It was her holiday as well as Indira's wedding party. Both must

enjoy themselves. She found it amusing to listen to the others talking. They all knew each other well; and though Videhi liked them and got on at once with them, she felt still the slight restraint of an outsider, and with it the pleasure an outsider feels in estimating his fellow people. They were talking now about personalities, and one name mentioned struck Videhi.

'I'd have thought,' said the Professor, 'that Kalyan would have been here tonight.'

Videhi started inwardly at the name. It was common enough in this province.

'Who is Kalyan?' she asked Indira.

'He is one of the I.C.S. here,' said Indira. 'We know him quite well; that is, since he has been posted here. He is clever and terribly serious.'

'It is good to have someone serious-minded,' said the professor.

The talk drifted now to the country's future, and what India needed from her youth. Videhi no longer listened. Neither youth nor India touched her then. She was remembering odd words of her mother about Kalyan's progress through the years. She was sure this was the same Kalyan, her Kalyan. She blushed as she used that term silently to herself. It is true, she thought. We are married. We do belong. Her preoccupation was noticed by Indira.

'You look tired,' she said to Videhi.

'A little, perhaps,' answered Videhi, 'but it is a good tiredness. Only just now I feel that with your present happiness one ought not to think of the future as these do.'

'You never did,' said Indira, smiling at her. 'Not even in our Delhi days. They sound so far away, don't they?'

'And do you now, at all,' asked Videhi, 'think seriously like your friend Kalyan?'

'He also is human,' said Indira. 'It is really that he is clever and sensitive, not serious. You can meet him if you wish.'

Do I wish? Videhi asked herself. Suddenly she wanted that evening's party to end. She wanted the dark to come and silence, and an end to all this chatter, however friendly it might be. Do I wish? she repeated. I have come to Bombay for Indira's sake, and for that only. That is not true, she added. I came for myself. I wanted to. I felt all the time that these few days in Bombay would give me release. I need them. I need to relax, to be quietly happy, to see Indira happy, to know that happiness can come to people.

The talk went on, and after dinner they sat out on the veranda, looking over the richly planted garden.

'It is a Shakespearean night,' said one of the guests. 'Look at the moon and the stars.'

Videhi did not look, nor did she listen when Indira teased her again about falling in love with the sea. The night and the sea are good, she thought, and they will always be there, but Kalyan . . . I shall not come again to Bombay so easily. Perhaps not at all. Why should I? She wondered whether she were afraid of Kalyan. Not now. I won't admit that now. But if that is so, she told herself, then I should see him. I wish Shalini were here, she thought suddenly, feeling a need for comfort and help. Home came back to her. She could almost hear her mother speaking. Shalini would say yes, thought Videhi. She would do all she could to persuade me to see Kalyan. Or rather she would not persuade me, because she would know that would not be the way. Yet for myself, would I resent it so much?

Through the night in her bedroom the same thoughts troubled her. She kept telling herself she should not think about it. There is no need to see him, she reflected,

.no need to think about him. He won't know that I am here. No one will know what we are to each other. I am inventing trouble again. It is because I want to see him, that I think like this. I still feel ashamed—ashamed of being weak about him. Once that word came into her head courage returned, and with it resolution, and she determined in the morning to say something to Indira that would bring Kalyan to the house. She dreamed of the surprise he would feel to see her again so unexpectedly. The dream gave her pleasure, and she dwelt upon it.

The next day it was not difficult amidst their shopping and visits to bring up the name of Kalyan.

'Of course he will come,' said Indira. 'Either tonight or tomorrow night. Ramesh likes him.'

That word strengthened somehow Videhi's feelings for both Ramesh and Kalyan. A new excitement possessed her, and it remained with her until the evening, when more guests came, amongst them Kalyan. Then shyness gripped her as perhaps it held Kalyan. Neither spoke, nor did they look each other directly in the face. As he was going, however, he went up to her, and asked how long she was staying in Bombay.

'Until the wedding is over,' said Videhi.

'May I see you?' asked Kalyan.

'Yes,' she answered. 'I am staying here.'

'May I come tomorrow morning?' .

'Yes,' she answered once more. 'We are going out for lunch, but I will be in during the morning.'

When the guests had left Indira turned to Videhi.

'Did you enjoy it?' she asked.

'Your friends,' said Videhi, 'are all very nice. This is different from Bihar.'

'We have a busy day tomorrow,' said Indira. 'I think we should go to bed early. We will lunch with

Ramesh, you know, and then he will take us out, and there will be another party at night. I have forgotten one thing, though, Videhi. I have to go out in the morning with Mother to see some of our relatives. Will you come with us, or stay at home?’

‘I shall stay at home,’ said Videhi, ‘if you don’t mind. I shall be quite all right.’

She was glad to get to bed comparatively early. Not that she was tired. She wanted to be alone to think about Kalyan. He had not changed, except to become more mature. There was an air of reserve and restraint about him. He looked well. She examined herself, but could find no unpleasurable reactions. She felt no dislike for him. That is as it should be, she thought. It would be childish to dislike him. I, too, have grown up. She wondered where he lived, and how he worked, and she pictured him in a place that was a combination of austerity, studiousness, and efficiency. He would be determined in his work, and he would have many books. Comfort he would care little for. She smiled at herself, and then turned to sleep.

Next morning Indira and her mother were busy getting ready to go out.

‘Mother says there will not be time to come back,’ said Indira. ‘You know what it is when you visit relatives. We will go straight to Ramesh’s house, and send the car for you. It won’t take very long. Will that be all right? You won’t mind being left here?’

‘No,’ said Videhi. ‘Please don’t worry about me. I shall be quite comfortable here, and I’ll see you at Ramesh’s for lunch.’

When they left she sat down to wait. For a while she was still, then she grew restless and looked at Indira’s books. About ten o’clock the servant came in and asked

her if she would like some coffee. She refused and then changed her mind.

'Yes, please,' she said. She was just sitting down to drink it when she heard a car outside. She went out to look. It was Kalyan. He spoke to the servant who came, and then went to the lounge where Videhi was waiting.

'Good morning,' said Videhi. 'Please sit down. Would you like some coffee?'

'No, thank you,' said Kalyan. 'Where is Indira?'

'She has gone out with her mother. She won't come back. I am meeting her at Ramesh's house for lunch.'

'I am glad,' said Kalyan. 'We can talk undisturbed. I was so eager to speak to you, but I kept wondering all through the night how it would be possible, and even now I wonder. I was so surprised to see you, Videhi. You have not changed, though you have grown more beautiful. Once I could not have believed that. Are you working now?'

'Yes,' answered Videhi. 'I work in Bihar in a little hospital there. I've been doing it for a year now, and I have got quite used to it. I am in charge of the women's side and I do private practice as well.'

'Tell me about it, please,' said Kalyan.

'There is not much to tell,' said Videhi. 'It is a small place, rather backward, and one does not meet many educated people there. The work is good—medical work is the same everywhere, I think—and I like it. There are always interesting cases. I go out quite a lot to patients in the town and in the villages.'

'And are you happy there, Videhi?' asked Kalyan.

'Yes,' said Videhi. 'My mother and my sister, Sakuntala, came to see me during the winter holidays. My other two sisters, Shubha and Vasanti, are married, you know.'

'I did not,' said Kalyan.

'Yes,' went on Videhi, 'they are both married, and they both have children. We are a very grown-up family now. Vishnu will be going to college soon. Father thinks he will go into a bank.'

'Yes,' said Kalyan. 'And what about yourself, are you going to stay all your life in Bihar?'

'I don't know,' said Videhi. 'I don't know at all. I have only just begun work, you see. So many things might happen.'

'Such as?' said Kalyan.

'Well, I might go to England for further studies. I don't know. But if I did I would certainly come back to a different kind of job.'

'Do you want to go abroad?' said Kalyan.

'Yes,' answered Videhi. 'Until now I have never really positively wanted to go abroad, but during this visit to Bombay I have seen the sea, and that made up my mind. It is little things like that that decide one. But it won't be for some time yet.'

'Do you know,' said Kalyan, 'this is the first time you have spoken to me about yourself.'

'Well,' said Videhi, 'perhaps we are both a little older and a little more civilised now.'

'Do you think so?' asked Kalyan.

'Yes,' said Videhi, 'I am sure. But now you tell me about yourself.'

'Are you sure you want to know?' asked Kalyan.

'Of course,' said Videhi. 'Why should I ask if I did not want to know?'

'My father has retired now,' said Kalyan, 'and he lives in Poona with Mother. He is writing a book on Maratha history. I did not think he had it in him, I thought the Service had swallowed up all his vitality, but he works hard at it, and it keeps him busy. As for myself, you

know the sort of life one leads in the I.C.S.—always drearily official. I had my first year in Satara, and then the rest in Bombay. I am going to Delhi in a few months, and I think I shall stay in the central government. That is all there really is.'

'The people here say you are very clever,' said Videhi.

Kalyan blushed. 'They talk a lot of nonsense,' he said.

'You are very keen on your work, aren't you?' said Videhi.

'Yes,' said Kalyan. 'And now I must be going. I don't want someone to come here and find us together. It might be embarrassing for you.'

'No,' said Videhi, 'it would not embarrass me. I am glad you came, Kalyan.'

'Shall we say goodbye?' asked Kalyan.

'We shall see each other at the wedding,' said Videhi.

'Until then goodbye.' And she held out her hand to him. He took it and blushed and went out.

Videhi sat down and thought about the meeting. They had said again so little. She knew she had changed toward Kalyan, and she was sure he had not changed towards her. When he touched her hand she had waited, wondering whether that old thrill of repulsion might return, but it had not. He was quieter now, and more self-controlled, and he had been very polite and respectful. I think, said Videhi to herself, that we can be friends. In fact, she added, we must be friends. It is silly to hold oneself apart. The rest of the day passed as planned. Ramesh at lunch in his own house was more attentive to Indira than he had previously been. He was excited and had lost some of the suavity of his professional manner, to recover a more natural grace and diffidence. The cinema they went to was very good, and then there was the party at night to which Ramesh came. At its end Indira turned to Videhi and said, 'Something has happened to you, Videhi. I have never seen you so gay before.'

‘I am happy,’ said Videhi, ‘because you are happy.’

The next day, the last before the wedding, they spent at home quietly but busily. Indira was packing all her things; most of them to go to Ramesh’s house, and a few for their week at Mahabaleshwar.

‘Won’t it be wet there?’ asked Videhi.

‘No,’ said Indira. ‘The monsoon will be nearly over. And in any case we will be alone, and we won’t mind if it does rain all the time.’

It was a happy task packing her clothes and books, and Videhi was glad to be of use. That night she kissed Indira good night and told her that tomorrow she would be a bride. They were both touched to happy tears.

The last day seemed one great rush. The wedding ceremony was quickly over, then there was the return to the house and the entertaining of the guests. Everywhere there were crowds of laughing, happy people. Kalyan was amongst them, and he sought Videhi out.

‘We can easily talk here,’ he said. ‘There is so little time left. Tell me how much longer you have in Bombay.’

‘Tonight I must leave,’ said Videhi. ‘If I leave tonight I can stay at Kashi for nearly a day, and then return to duty.’

‘What time is your train?’ asked Kalyan.

‘Midnight,’ said Videhi, ‘or nearly that. It is the boat train from Bombay to Calcutta.’

‘You could stay in Bombay another day then,’ said Kalyan.

‘Yes, I suppose I could,’ said Videhi. ‘I have not told my mother. I would come to Kashi. I wanted to surprise them.’

‘I want to talk to you alone, Videhi. Will you come out with me this afternoon when Indira has left? We can go to a cinema or a restaurant, or I can take you out in my car.’

'Will that be alone?' asked Videhi.

'No,' said Kalyan. 'I would like to ask you to my flat, but I am afraid.'

'Why?' asked Videhi.

'I am afraid you would refuse and think badly of me, and then it is not proper for you.'

'I will come,' said Videhi. 'I'll pack my things and tell Indira's mother I am leaving early. You can take me to the station tonight. We will go after Indira has left, but I must not miss my train. We had better mingle with the other guests now.'

And they joined the party separately. Then Videhi slipped upstairs to pack. This did not take her long. She was quick and active, and all sorts of thoughts were racing through her head. She felt that once again the time had come for a decision, but she was not troubled or hurt by it. She knew what the decision would be. It was as though she realised now why she had looked with such longing towards this visit to Bombay. It was indeed another milestone in her life—not the end, but the beginning.

In the house all was stir and excitement. The guests were crowded into groups chatting together. Some of them were outside in the garden on the lawn, where tables with chairs and sunshades had been erected. A line of cars thronged the roadway to the house. At the door was Ramesh's car, waiting. Videhi looked about for Indira. She was not visible. She saw Ramesh alone and guessed that Indira must be upstairs. She ran up again to Indira's room and found her friend just ready to set off, happy, joyful and excited.

'Let me say goodbye,' said Videhi, 'before you are lost in the crowd and all the others come. I wish you happiness, Indira. I am sure you will get it.'

'I'll write to you, Videhi,' said Indira, 'in a few days.'

You must come again to Bombay. I am so glad you came this time, and thank you again for your lovely saris. Give my love to your mother at Kashi, and now I really must go. It is almost like eloping, escaping from all these people,' and with a happy smile she went out.

Videhi stood at the bedroom window and watched. In a few minutes Indira came out with Ramesh and they both got into their car, and then, amidst waving of hands and cries of farewell, they drove off, a happy couple happily garlanded.

Videhi waited for the other visitors to depart. She was not impatient. There seemed no urgency of time. As she stood framed in the window watching the garden scene and the flowers and the people, it appeared as though she belonged to the house and Indira were the stranger. She was not thinking now of Indira, or of the garden, or of the people. She was recalling again her arrival in Poona and how lonely and desperate she had felt. Then it was as though she had been driven in unwillingly by forces outside her. She recalled what Kalyan had said to her and how they had forced conversation between them, both trembling, both afraid, and she in growing terror. And she remembered how Kalyan had kissed her, and how bitterly she had resented that kiss. The images passed before her in her mind like scenes in a film, and as such they hardly touched her. Then she passed on to Delhi and all that Delhi had meant to her, and the love she had felt for Prem Nath. This, too, gave her no pain, though she sighed a little when the feeling came that this, too, was dead. Then the long years of loneliness in study and grief and the past year in the hospital slowly went through her mind. They have been a discipline to surrender, she said to herself. Now I will struggle no more, because I do not want to struggle.

She saw Kalyan in the garden, and he noticed her and came up to her room.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked.

‘Take my luggage,’ said Videhi. ‘I will say goodbye to Indira’s mother.’

In a few moments she, too, was in the car with Kalyan.

‘Where shall we go?’ he asked.

‘Take me to the sea,’ said Videhi, ‘and then perhaps to your flat, or where you like.’

They drove off in silence through the streets out on to the coastal road for several miles. Videhi could now see the great expanse of ocean more clearly, and she asked Kalyan to stop by the roadside whilst she sat and looked and drank in the sea air.

Kalyan said, ‘I wanted to talk to you, Videhi. There is so little time left until tonight, but you are so remote gazing at the sea.’

‘It is lovely,’ said Videhi. ‘I have never seen it before. I had forgotten that life might contain more loveliness. Let me look at it, Kalyan.’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I am glad it pleases you. I am glad you are happy. Indeed I don’t think I have ever seen you like this before, so happy, so beautiful. But the sea is always there, Videhi, and you will soon be gone.’

‘Do you want me to go?’ asked Videhi, and she smiled at him. ‘The sea is always there, Kalyan, and time is short, but if you wish I will not go, or if you wish I will return. I am ready now, Kalyan.’

THE END

.

